

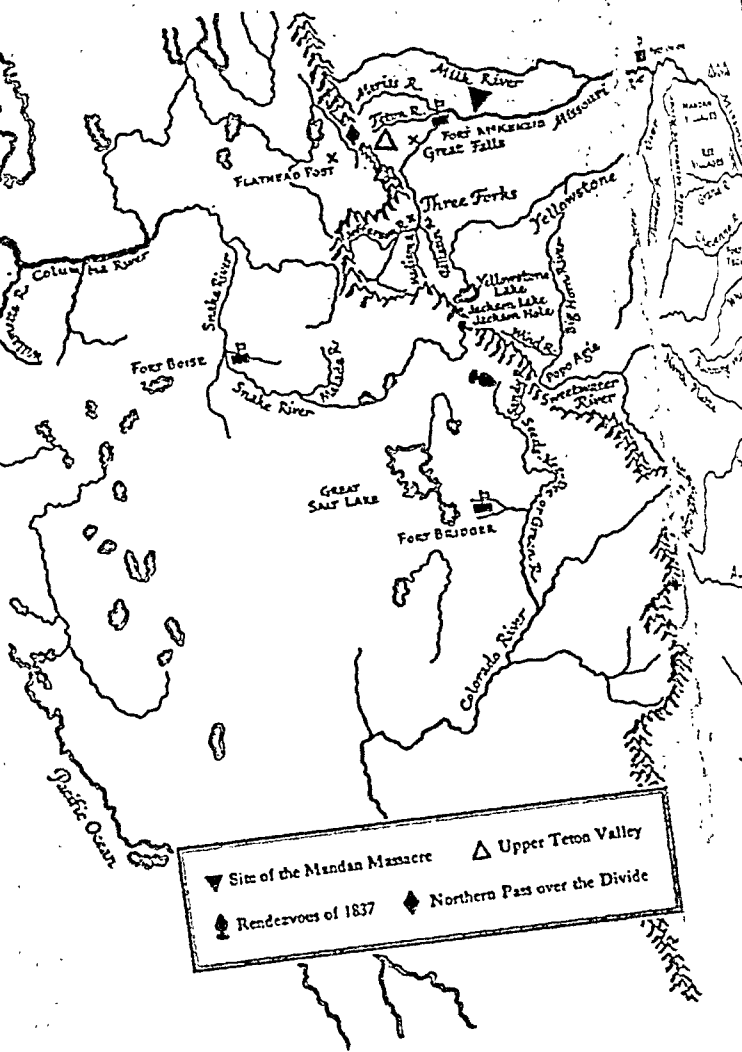
*From an Answer to One Reader's
Complaint about The Big Sky:*

"... This is a book about a tragedy which took place on the North American continent a little over a hundred years ago when a wilderness was conquered, plundered and destroyed in the space of a single lifetime by men who were everything to which you object—blasphemers, whoremongers, prodigious consumers of liquor, gamblers, thieves and murderers. The purpose of the author has been to show that in living and acting as they did, they destroyed the wilderness, which was the only thing they really loved. I don't see how the author could have written the story—and it is a very moral story—that he wanted to tell if his hero had been a clean-living, upright man. There weren't any clean-living, upright men engaged in despoiling the American wilderness at that time. The book does say that bad men are bad men and destroy themselves by their badness. Mr. Guthrie is not in league with darkness.

Sincerely,

WILLIAM SLOANE"

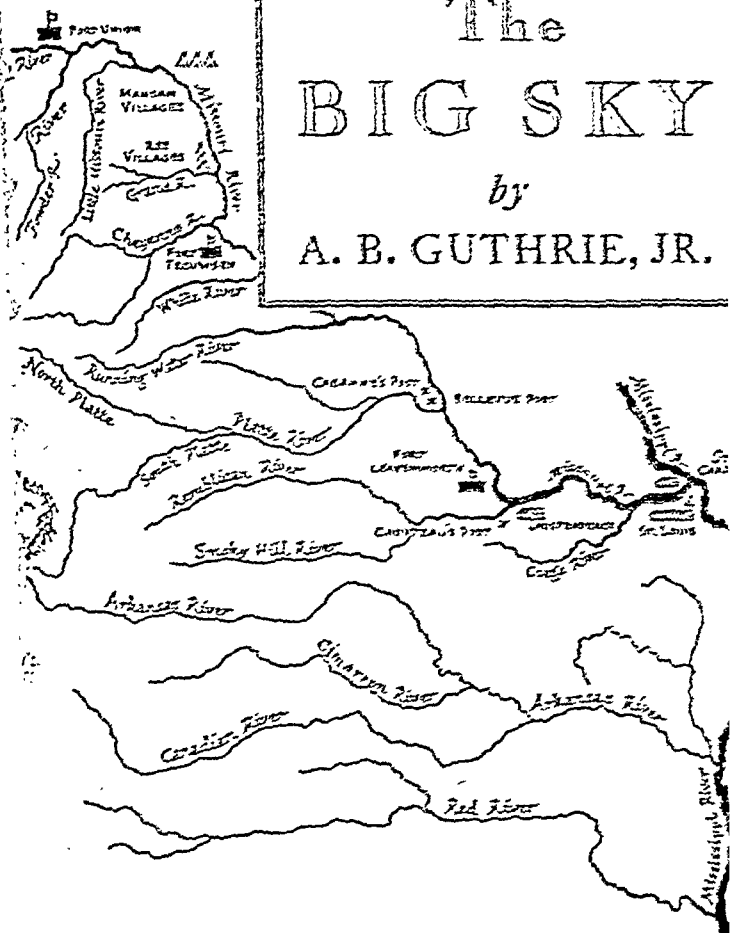
original publisher of *The Big Sky*



The BIG SKY

by

A. B. GUTHRIE, JR.



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To
MY FATHER



The
BIG SKY



Part One



1830

Chapter I

SERENA CAUDILL heard a step outside and then the squeak of the cabin door and knew that John was coming in. She kept poking at the fireplace, in which a hen was browning.

"Where's Boone?"

"Around, I reckon." She looked up then and saw him shut the door against the rain, saw him shut it behind him without turning while his eyes took in the murky kitchen. He limped to the wall, making an uneven thump on the puncheon floor, started to hang his coat on its peg, thought better of it and hunched it back around his neck. In the warmth of the room the smells of cow and sweat and drink and wet woolens flowed from him.

"A body kin tell when it's rainin' just by the sound of your feet," she said, while her gaze followed him.

"You said that aplenty of times." He stood facing the window, as if he could see out of the oiled paper that did for glass. "You'd sing different if you had a ball in your leg."

"I ain't belittlin' it," she said, and tried the hen with a fork. In her mind's eye she was seeing him, that when he got back from Tippecanoe with a ball in h

the bloody hide of an Indian in his knapsack. He had kept the scalp and tanned the skin and made himself a razor strop out of it. It was a time ago, a right smart time, for a man still to have misery from a wound.

He swung around. "I said, where's Boone?"

She could keep her mouth shut, but her head bobbed as if he had pushed it, pointing in the direction of the dog trot that led to the cabin they slept in.

His voice filled the room. "Boone! You Boone!"

Steps sounded on the dog trot, above the busy whisper of the rain. The door swung open. Boone stood just outside, letting the rain fall on him. "What you want?"

"Come in!"

"What you want, Pap?" Boone sidled in, leaving the door open.

"You been to the store ag'in, drinkin' liquor and raisin' sand, just like you was growed up."

Serena tried to keep the quaver out of her voice. "If he lid, he come by it honest."

"It ain't for the calf to beller like the bull. You keep your long nose out of this, old woman."

His eyes went back to the boy. "You prit' near killed Mose Napier."

"He deviled me."

"He'll devil ye more. Ambrose Napier's swore to a warrant."

"Ambrose went to the law?" Serena asked.

"Goddam it, will you keep your mouth shut! Yes, he taken out a warrant." To Boone he said, "Git on out."

"You ain't goin' to whale me ag'in, Pap."

"So?"

"I come seventeen last month, and I don't figger to take no more."

"You can figger for your own self when the law says you be old enough."

"I ain't takin' no more, I said. I'll stand up to you."

Pap caught Boone's arm and pushed him toward the door. "You ain't man enough for your pap yit."

"I'll leave this here place. For good, too. I ain't held here."

Serena said, "He means it, Pap. Can't you tell? And us standin' in need of him like we do."

"I told you onc't to hush, but no, by God, you got to have your say! I ain't just tellin' you ag'in." Pap gave Boone a shove. "If'n you leave, the law'll draw you back. Git outside!"

Serena watched them go out. For height they were almost of a size, but Pap's heft made Boone look skinny. She turned back to the fireplace and with the fork she had forgotten in her hand stabbed again at the hen.

Boone heard Pap following close on his heels as he stepped beyond the door. He caught the strong whiff of whisky that had staled in the stomach. He heard the door pull to and felt the beat of the small rain on his hair.

Pap's voice surprised him, sounding changed now and friendly. "Boone. Oh, Boone."

Boone turned his head, and then Pap struck. His fist caught Boone high on the cheek. Boone staggered ahead and fell in the mud. Above the pounding in his head he heard Pap's voice. "Goddam you! Think you can match me!" Pap's boot swung back for a kick. Boone rolled away from it, got his knees under him and scuttled ahead, until at last he found his feet and began to run.

Pap came after him, his boots slapping against the wet earth like those of a man with two good legs. The woodpile lay ahead. A stick stuck up from it as if waiting to be grabbed. It pulled out easy. Turning with the swing of it, Boone had one glimpse of Pap's scared face. The smack of the stick against it was like a lick on a punkin. Pap took a couple of crazy steps and fell full length and lay

Boone said "There!" and let the stick fall. Now he had quit running he could feel the blood pumping in his ears.

Out of the shadows around the Caudill's old barn Dan came slipping. "Godamighty, Boone!" he said, bending down to look at Pap. "I been hidin' out, knowin' Pap was on the warpath. He'll kill you now if he ain't dead hisself."

"Not me, he won't."

"Won't?"

"I'm leavin'."

"Leavin'?"

"You want to come with me?"

"I reckon not, Boone. Anyways, Pap ain't mad at me."

"I knew you wouldn't."

"Where you goin' to?"

"Ain't sayin'." Boone turned and made for the cabin, from which came the gleam of a new-lit candle. Before he got to the door, Dan came running up and pushed ahead of him into the kitchen.

Ma was taking the bird from its spit.

"Boone done for Pap, most likely," Dan told her.

She had started for the table with the bird. The words stopped her. Her eyes turned to Boone.

"Goddam him!" he said.

"What?"

"I hit him a lick with a club."

Dan added, "He's lyin' out there with the rain beatin' on him and he don't even know it."

Ma put on a bonnet and started to pull on the rag of a coat.

Boone asked, "Wait'll I git gone?"

"Gone?" She stood again without moving, as if letting thought sink into her. "You ain't really leavin', Boone? He'll put the law after you."

Boone walked across the kitchen and out the door to the dog trot and went into the other cabin and took a hickory

shirt and cotton underwear and hand-knit socks from a chest. Back in the kitchen, he spread the shirt on the floor and dropped the other things on it and rolled them up.

Serena watched him. From underneath the water shelf she dug out a small sack and handed it to him without speaking.

Dan said, "You sure fotched him a dandy, Boone."

"You go see about your pap," Ma told him. "I'll be there in a shake." Dan shuffled toward the door. To Boone she said, "I do' know why you want that there strop, nor the hair, neither."

Boone held up the strop and scalp that Pap had got in the fight with the Prophet. The strop was a muddy brown and had commenced to crumble at the edges, but it was an honest-to-God Indian-skin strop all the same. The hair on the scalp had lost its shine, and the little patch of skin that held it together had shriveled and curled and lay lost in the hair like a bur in a dog's coat.

"I know," answered Dan. "He wants to make a show of 'em, like Pap always done." He snickered. "I reckon he'll favor a leg, too."

Boone said, "I don't hanker to be like Pap, and I won't take much off'n you, neither, Dan. Hear?" He unrolled the shirt and put the strop and scalp with the rest and rolled the bundle tight again, dropping it into the bag Ma had given him. He looked about the room afterward, moving to the corner by the door as his eye fell upon Pap's rifle with its powder horn and pouch.

"I don't know what your pap'll do without that there rifle gun," Ma said.

"If'n you didn't kill him with the club, you'll kill him by takin' Old Sure Shot," Dan put in.

Boone slung the horn and pouch from his shoulder and picked up his rifle and bundle. He looked at Dan at Ma.

"Best hurry, Boone," Dan said, loc'

"Can't tell when Pap'll come to hisself." Underneath his funning and his go-easy way Dan was a good-enough boy.

Serena turned from Boone and all at once seemed to see the hen lying forgotten on the table. She picked it up and rolled it in a rag and handed it to Boone. Her eyes wouldn't come level with his; they fixed themselves on his chest. Of a sudden he saw that she looked like a tired, sad rabbit, her eyes round and watery and her nose twitching. He felt his face twist suddenly and his throat knot and the tears about to come. He said, "Goodbye."

Her voice was a rusty whisper. "Good luck to ye, Boone."

Dan followed him to the door. Night had closed down outside, so wet and black a body felt almost like drawing back. Dan spoke just with his breath. "To St. Louis?"

Through the murmur of the rain there came to them the beat of a horse's hoofs. The Caudills' old dog began to bark. "You shut your mouth!" Boone said, and stepped into the dark.

Chapter II

ALL NIGHT Boone walked through the rain, feeling the steady drip of it on his head and shoulders while his eye poked for the dark trail among the trees and his mind kept going over the fight at the store and the later trouble with Pap. He reckoned he'd broke Mose Napier's face all right. He could see him, with his open jaw skewed over and his eyes rolling as he lay in the dirt. It was all right, too. It was what Mose had asked for. Mose was older than him, by two year anyway, and a sight too big for his breeches. A body could take so much and then, if he was a man, he didn't take any more, leastwise as long as he could hit back.

He figured he might have done for Pap, too. It was a

even lick he'd fatched him. And, like with Mose, it was all right. It pleased Pap to beat on somebody, especially when he was mean with liquor. It didn't seem like liquor acted on Pap the way it did on others. It didn't make him laugh and feel big. He just got meaner and meaner and his face screwed down like a crazy man's, and, when he came home, everybody better act like he was God Almighty or Pap would whop him. Like as not he would anyway, far as that went.

Boone figured he hadn't done anything that a true man wasn't bound to do. A man couldn't look himself in the face if he let people make little of him. What if he did have some store liquor in him when he tackled Mose? It was still right, and it settled things man to man, like they ought to be settled. And still the Napiers had gone to law and put the high sheriff after him. And it would be like Pap to get the law on his side, being he couldn't do for himself. It wasn't fair, bringing in the sheriff, just because a body did what he had to. It wasn't right to set the law on a man, making him feel small and alone, making him run away. It wasn't right, all taking sides against one and the one not in the wrong.

It was like people and things were all banded against him, the trail losing itself in the dark and the trees hunched close around him and the night dripping wet and maybe unfriendly eyes watching from it, laughing when he stumbled. It was enough to put a lonesome fright in the heart and a lump in the throat.

Pap would know where to look for him. Dan would tell, if Pap pushed him. Dan knew as well as anybody that he'd strike for St. Louis, aiming to move into Injun country from there and so, maybe, to meet up with Uncle Zeb Calloway. Uncle Zeb was Ma's brother and had lit out ten years before to trap varmints in the West. He had fought with the Injuns and killed buffalo and made many a far journey into country where you mightn't see another m

less it was an Injun and you dropped to the ground and belied up and leveled on him. That one time when Uncle Zeb came back to Kentucky for a visit, he wore buckskins that were black from grease and blood and camp fire, and he smelled of smoke and musk and liquor, and when he told about where he had been it was almost like a speechmaking. He spoke in a big voice and waved his arms and talked about being free like it was something you could heft. Pap sat around and drank and watched Uncle Zeb when he was talking, and as the drink took hold and his face got darker, he tried to make out that the west wasn't so much, after all, but Uncle Zeb looked at him, like you'd look at something too small to take notice of. And sometimes Uncle Zeb went quiet, looking away like he didn't see, and Dan put questions to him to get him started again.

Daylight came slow and gloomy, but the rain had fallen off to a drizzle and the drizzle by and by dried up in the cold air. The sky was still gray, though, and low, and when Boone paused on a ridge to look back the distances were shut off by mist. He moved off the trail anyhow, now that day had come, and in a close grove of black oak unwrapped the hen and tore a leg-and-thigh off. It wasn't much more than a bite, hungry as he was, but when he had sucked the bones clean he wound the rag back around the rest of the hen and stuffed it in the sack and set about charging Old Sure Shot, the long-barreled Kentucky rifle that Pap had set such store by. Pap would hardly let a body look at it, he prided it that much. The feel of the smooth steel and dressed sugar wood was good to the hand.

The loading done, Boone settled his shoulders against the base of a tree, feeling his muscles melt. He would get up in a shake and go on, he told himself, and fell asleep at once. He woke up worried and stiff with chill. By the looks of the sunless sky he figured the time to be high noon.

He got up, anxious with the feeling that he had wasted time that might go against him, and set off again.

He kept to the side of the trail now, in the cover of the wooded ridges, and scanned the back track when the view opened behind him. The going was rough, this way, but safer, and for mile after mile he climbed and dipped and wound through the timber, until dark began to settle again and he stood high above the valley of the Kentucky river, and through the thickening dusk saw below him a spread of buildings that he took for Frankfort.

He stood still, and felt tiredness on him like a weight, pulling at his muscles, trying to drag him down to earth. As he halted there on the height where the rolling Blue Grass fell away toward the river, he began to shake with cold. Even yet there was a dampness in his clothes which went chill against his skin as the wind blew up the river, driving through his homespun coat and worn jeans. Little ripples ran across the muscles of his chest and back, and, unless he kept his jaw clenched, his teeth set up a fine clicking.

There was no help for it, though. He hadn't thought to bring flint and steel, and though he had heard that a man could get himself a fire by shooting at close range into powder sprinkled over lighters he shied from the risk of both shot and blaze. He might go down into the town, of course, and ask for a place to sleep, but there was no telling what people were like, living crowded up that way. Probably there was more law there than a man could believe, and a peck of rules to go by or run into trouble. Anyhow, it was too close to home. Maybe someone there would know him. Maybe they already had heard the law was after him.

He started angling down the long slope, aiming to the right, away from the town. It was dark when he reached the river, but a light shone from a window downstream and he went toward it, walking soft, letting the noise of his horse lose itself in the sound of the heavy water by his side. He tripped and picked himself up, and then laid down.

and groped backward until his hand closed on a rope. He followed it down, until it ended at the nose of a boat. His hand went out and explored her bottom and found it dry, and on the gunwales felt the oars shipped in their locks as if the owner had left her against a quick return. He stowed his rifle in her, and his bag, and then, following the rope back up the bank, untied it from the tree and pushed off.

He wasn't a knowing hand with a boat, and the stream was high and strong, but by and by he got her nosed well into the current and felt her push ahead as he put his back to the oars. The shore faded to a dark rim, far and dim as a cloud in a night sky, and now there was only the river running black beneath him and the pull of it against the boat and the busy whisper of the water. The light ashore fell back and was gone, leaving no point by which he could judge his drift, but he felt the stronger muscle of the current as he came into the channel and knew that he was being carried far downstream. He kept at his oars, bending far forward and coming back with all the power of legs and back and arms, feeling the shuddering give of the blades as he brought them through. A second light peeped at him, distant on the other bank, and he took it for his guide and bent harder to the oars until the current let up and the shore rose like a wall before his eye. He eased her in, then, and pulled her up and tied her and, taking his rifle and bag, set out toward the light.

He tried to go quiet in the dark, feeling ahead with his feet before he let them down, but a tangle of short growth on the slope crackled under his softest step. From the direction of the house a dog began to bark.

Boone stopped and waited, hitching the rifle closer in the crook of his arm. He was trembling again, now that the hard work of rowing was over, but the cold didn't seem to touch him close. It was as if his body was numb, being too tired and hungry to feel. The dog kept barking, coming

on as the silence made him braver. Boone leaned his rifle against a tree and from his bag took the one-legged carcass of the hen. He tore off the other leg, rewrapped the bird and put it back, and then stepped forward with his hand out while he whispered, "Here, boy! Here, boy!"

He felt the dog before he could see him, felt the cold nose and the food taken from his hand and heard the bones snapping. He stooped. "All right, boy." The dog's head came under his fingers. He scratched it around the ears. "Hush now!"

A square of light appeared ahead, and a man's figure lined itself in it and stood there silent for a moment. Then a voice said, "He's just barkin' a coon," and afterward it rose in a call, "Here, Blackie! Here!" The dog slipped from under Boone's hand and grew to be one with the darkness. The square of light narrowed to a ribbon and went out.

Boone hunched down, shivering, until after the gleam in the window itself had died. Then he edged ahead like a hunter and came to a small farmyard and made out the house and, to his right, the outline of a barn. He stole to the barn and felt for the door and let himself in.

The warm odor of cow came to his nose. He heard a soft breathing. "Saw, Boss!" he said under his breath, closing the door behind him. He stood without moving, letting the animal warmth of the place get to his skin, then shifted his bag to the arm that held his rifle and stepped forward, saying, "Saw! Saw!" His hand groped ahead, meeting nothing, and he wondered where the cow was, until his foot touched the soft hide and he realized she was lying down.

"Saw!" he said, expecting her to rise. "Saw!" But she lay there, and he thrust his hand down to the warm hide, wondering at her gentleness. He felt in the straw at her side to see that it was dry, and brought himself around and crouched down on his butt in the soft litter and snuggled his head against her.

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taking out what was left of the hen. He ate it all, ending by crunching up the softer bones and sucking out the pockets of lights while the cow chewed on her cud and let him take of her warmth. Then he squirmed closer, pillowing his head on her flank, and with the familiar odor of the barn strong in his nostrils closed his eyes.

Out of the tired cloud of his mind Ma's face appeared, the dark and watery eyes, the broad nose, the pinched mouth, the sad look of having given up to work and worry and Pap. He saw Dan going to the barn and the woodpile doing chores—Dan who could get around Pap, but hadn't the spunk to face him. He saw the shagbark hickory back of the cabin, the worm fence, the smoke trailing from the chimney. Before he could stop it, a sob broke in his throat. He turned his face against the flank of the cow and let himself cry. "Good luck to you, too, Ma," he said.

After a while he sat up and gouged the tears from his eyes, feeling ashamed but relieved, too, and slowly almost cozy, safe and unseen in the dark barn with the gentle cow for company. He settled back against her.

Chapter III

THE MOVEMENT of the cow roused him. She came over on her belly and with a grunting sigh got her back legs under her and heaved her hindquarters up. He was wide awake at once, but cold and stiff clear to his bones. Still, he felt rested, and anxious to get on while the world still slept. He stood and gave himself time to stretch. He wondered how long it was until sunup. Three hours, he reckoned. Anyhow, he best be moving. First, though, he felt for his rifle and went over it with the sack that had held the hen. There was enough grease in the cloth to hold off rust. Afterwards he emptied the bullet pouch and counted the balls as

He brought his rifle to the crook of his arm, lifted his bag, and set out again, walking in the middle of the wet and rutted road. It was early yet for travel, and now that he had crossed the river, he felt safer, though less at home. It was all strange country ahead; but somewhere to the west where the road led lay Louisville, and beyond it Greenville, Paoli, Vincennes, Carlyle, Lebanon, and St. Louis. He could hear Uncle Zeb calling out the names, going on west in his mind like a man with a spell on him.

There wasn't any cause to leave the road yet, he decided, thinking maybe he would be safe to stay to it all day, except when he came to towns and tollhouses. He'd circle around them. And if he saw any travelers, he'd just cut out into the woods like a man hunting.

He wished he had something to eat. Corn bread and sorghum and salt pork, like his ma would give him if he was still home, or anything fit to put his teeth to. He had an empty ache in his stomach, and the spit came into his mouth just from thinking.

He kept walking while the sky paled and the naked trees along the way stood black against the cold gray of morning. The sun edged up and looked over the rim of the world like a careful eye from behind a wall.

Glancing back, Boone saw a stage coming and so left the road and screened himself in the trees. He watched it go by, the four horses spanking along as the driver flicked them, the polished metal gleaming in the sun, the body swaying in its thorough-braces as the wheels rose and fell in the rough trail. When it had gone from sight, he came back to the road and from a hill saw a settlement in the distance. The driver's trumpet sounded ahead, telling the townsmen the stage was coming in.

Boone cut around the town and circled back to the trail a half mile beyond it, having waited on a ridge until the coach had rolled on ahead.

As far as he could see, the road lay clear. He hitched up

his jeans and took the rifle from under his arm and rested it on his shoulder and fell into stride again. He wondered how far it was to Louisville. He wondered whether Pap or the law was on that stage. He wished he had something to eat.

Wondering and wishing, he didn't hear the traveler behind him until it was too late.

"Where you headin'?" asked a friendly voice.

Boone's hand tightened on the butt of his rifle as he turned. The voice came from on top an old work wagon drawn by two sad mules.

"Down the road a piece."

"Hop up."

The driver had an open, friendly face, not old, twenty-five or thirty, maybe, but colored and lined by the weather as a man's face ought to be. He had an eye as bright blue as a summer sky. From underneath his worn cap a lock of red hair fell.

Boone got in.

"Goin' to Louisville myself," the driver said. "Wisht I could make her afore night, but it ain't no use. Time don't mean nothin' to a dead man, no more'n to a hog, but seems like it means a heap to his kin." He jerked his thumb toward the back of the wagon, and Boone, looking over his shoulder, saw a plank box there.

"Name's Deakins," said the man. "Jim Deakins. Live just several hollers from here."

The blue eyes asked a question. After a little Boone answered, "Zeb Calloway."

Deakins put out his hand. "Pleased to run into you, Zeb. Now, you take some fellers, it don't make ar'y difference if their company's dead or alive, but me, I can't get no pleasure out of a corpse."

He looked at Boone for a "Me, neither."

"They just lay back quiet," he went on, "never sayin' a word, and by and by you shut your mouth yourself, feelin'

oneasy like as if what you said would be turned against you, in heaven or hell, one." He added, "A dead body's like someone sittin' in judgment."

He caught Boone's eye on the basket that stuck out from under the seat.

"Have an apple," he said, and reached down and got one for him.

"Reckon you been workin' with cows?" he asked, while his nose opened and his eyes went over Boone. His hand went out and flicked a piece of manure from Boone's sleeve.

"Uh-huh."

"You can nigh always tell what a man is by lookin' at him," said Deakins. "Now you take the old gentleman there in the box. He's got four women dead. Four. And a fifth one still livin' on the farm. And young! God Almighty! He's got chirren beyond countin'."

He paused and gave Boone a solemn look. "And what would you say he ought to take after, with all them wives and a passel of young?"

When Boone didn't speak, he answered his own question. "He ought to look like a goat, I figger. And that's just what the old gentleman looks like. Got white whiskers that'll reach to his belly button.

"Mc," he went on, "I got nary woman and nary a young'n—to tell about, leastways—so I keep the brush down pretty short. That, and my whiskers is kind of a dirty brindle. Have another apple."

Farther on a tollhouse came into sight.

"You'll get jolted around some," Deakins said, pulling his team out of the road. "At what I took this job for I can't be payin' no tolls, savin' one I can't get out of. Must be six or seven of 'em 'twixt here and Louisville, and it's twenty up to twenty-five cents every time. It don't take long to eat up three dollars."

Boone asked, "Why you takin' the dead man to Louisville?"

"When a feller's had a bunch of wives, he's sure enough got trouble, even after he can't hear 'em no more. The one that's livin' wanted to bury the old gentleman on the farm, but the chirren by the other wives wouldn't hear to it. They live at Louisville mostly, and when they hearn he was gone they come to the farm and give notice to the widder woman that he had to be put down proper, at Louisville. So they rastled around for two-three days, yellin' Pa would want this and Pa would want that. When Louisville won out, I got the job of haulin' his body in."

They jolted through the open fields, skirting the tolltaker's land. The wagon rocked and bumped and squeaked as the mules lagged ahead. The plank coffin screeched, sliding on the wagon bed.

"Got to take 'er slow on these here shun-pikes," Deakins explained. "Not that it hurts the old gentleman, but I can't deliver him bruised up too much. How would he feel when they open the lid for a last look, if he had a couple of black eyes?" He grinned at Boone. "Don't hang back on them apples. That's what God made 'em for, to eat."

They came back to the road. Swinging an already frayed-out switch, Deakins got the mules to step a little faster. "They say a mule'll always get you there," he said, bearing on their rumps, "but time he does, like as not you don't want to go."

They came after a while to another tollgate and circled it and later to another that Deakins let the mules head for. "There's a crick tears through here," he explained, "and she's steep on both sides, and this here body will sure enough come out, whiskers and all, if we don't cross the bridge."

The tollkeeper came out of the house and stretched out his hand. "Two bits."

Deakins dug in his pocket, bringing out a thin handful of cut money. He offered a ragged, fish-shaped piece.

The tolltaker eyed it.

"She's cut finer'n a frog hair," Deakins said. "Quarter of a silver dollar, exact."

The man looked as if he had his doubts, but he motioned them on.

"It wasn't so short at that," Deakins told Boone when they were under way again. "Not more'n two-three cents. I had to cut 'er with a chisel, which ain't as close as shears."

The afternoon dragged on and the winter sky came down. Darkness lay like a fog on the ridges.

"I'd love to get shot of this here body," Deakins' voice sounded uneasy. "Maybe we could get there afore mornin' if we kep' goin' and the mules held out."

"Got to git him there tonight?"

"No. Tomorrow'll do, long as it's cold like this. I got feed for the mules and a bedroll and some beans and side meat cooked up and a piece of corn bread. But I'd just as leave not spend the night with a corpse." Deakins' eyes of a sudden were hopeful. "It's best to stop, though. Would you keer to stay with me?"

"I was fixin' to say I would." Just the name of food made Boone's stomach hurt. He was dizzy and weak for want of it, and windy with the apples he had eaten.

Deakins pulled the team over and, while Boone gathered wood, unhooked and fed the mules, tying them to the wagon wheels.

When they had eaten the pan of corn bread and warmed-up beans and fat meat, Deakins lifted out the bedroll and spread it on the ground. Taking off their boots, they lay down, drawing the thin cover over them. Boone stowed his rifle under the blanket at his side.

Deakins lay on his back, his eyes open and blinking at the sky. "Here we are," he said, "a-lookin' up at the stars and feelin' good with food in our belly and talkin'. Makes a body wonder where the old gentleman's went to. Makes a body wonder what he's seein' and feelin' and doin'. Reckon he's up there listenin' to us, knowin' all that goes on? Reckon

his dead women is there, or did God give him a new one? Or you reckon he's still in the box, waitin' his turn to go up, or maybe down?"

He was silent for a breath or so, and then he asked, "Zeb, don't it make you feel kind of techy?"

Boone was so tired he could barely keep track of the talk. His muscles had flattened out. When he closed his eyes, his mind went drifting off.

Deakins' voice came again. "Don't it?"

"He's dead, ain't he?"

"That's what they say."

"Let's git on to sleep, then. A dead dog never bit nobody."

Even then, though, Deakins didn't sleep right away. Through a dream Boone heard him ask, "I reckon there ain't much that skeers you, be there, Zeb?"

Chapter IV

LOUISVILLE was busy as an anthill and bigger than all the places, put together, that Boone had ever seen. Even on the fringe of the town, where a man could still look off and mark where the river ran, the houses squatted pretty near elbow to elbow, and farther on the buildings looked to be pushing for room, trying to keep from being pinched. It put him in mind of the time he and Dan and Pap and Ma all slept in one bed after Pap had come in drunk and set fire to the other bed with his pipe. In and out of the buildings men and women, whites and niggers, kept popping. They made a stream along both sides of the street. Wagons loaded with lumber and ropes and hides, and carriages drawn by high-stepping horses with heads strapped back rolled east and west and crosswise. A canvas-topped wagon rattled across the street in front of them, showi

"He would have to stand by a man, come whatever."

Deakins' inquiring blue gaze went again to the rumps of his mules. "I ain't no half-horse, half-alligator. I been whopped, plenty of times, and I reckon I will be ag'in. But I never laid down yit on a friend, regardless."

"He would have to know to keep his tongue."

There was a stiffness in Deakins' manner when he answered. "I ain't askin' to go—with you, anyways." He clucked to the team.

"Would you, Jim?"

"Are you askin'?"

"I'm askin'."

Deakins' sorrel beard riffled to his grin. "Wrap 'er up and charge 'er down, then," he said. "Zeb, I'm your parcel. I been lookin' for someone p'inted west myself, and you suit me, longways and sidewise."

"My name ain't Zeb Calloway."

"The handle don't matter."

"It's Boone. Boone Caudill."

"Pleased to meetcha."

"I'm runnin' away from Pap. That's why I said a man would have to keep his tongue."

Deakins nodded. "A pry pole couldn't git it out." He added abruptly, "Here we are." He reined the mules to the side. "I'll pull over and find someone to help me tote the old gentleman in. You watch the mules. They ain't used to city life." He jumped from the wagon and headed for the undertaker's door.

Boone waited, holding the reins while his thoughts ran ahead. He would be safe before night, safe across the state line, beyond the river. The Ohio would lie yonder, and across it was country a man could get his breath in. They figured wrong if they thought they'd locked him up for the lick he had given Mose Napier, even if it killed him. He would go over the river and laugh at them, him and Jim Deakins would, taking their time, then, to St. Louis. It was

a right smart of a river, though, wide and deep. They would have to find a way to cross it.

While his mind ran on, he studied the people that thumped up and down the board walk, the city men walking duck-footed with their bellies out, the women snugged up at the waist like a sack with a rope around it. There was a man had got himself a knock, with the towel wrapped around his head. A fat man walked with him, a man as fat as Mr. Harrison Combs, the high sheriff. The bandaged head tilted back. The eyes under the bandage looked at Boone, and a flash came into the dark face.

Boone's hand grabbed for his rifle and bag. His legs shot him over the off wheel. The bag caught on the wheel and jelled out of his hand, the bag with his clothing in it and the Indian skin strop and the scalp that he had aimed to prove himself by. "Stop! You're under arrest!" He landed running, bounding over a fat woman in a checkered bonnet as he rounded the corner and made in the direction of the river. Behind him he heard the mules snort, heard the wagon clatter and the cobbles scrape on the floor boards as the team waded. He heard voices crying "Whoa! Whoa! Halt!" Above all came Pap's hoarse "Stop him!" and then the sound of running feet, few at first, just a patter of them, but growing with each stride of his own, as if he shook them from the buildings and doorways and walks, out of the quiet top of business into the pound of the chase.

He started from the sidewalk into the street, hearing the footfalls change behind him, clattering on the boards and fading off into a dull thumping against earth as they slanted after him. Up a cross street he caught sight of the mules swinging into a turn, coming toward him now, the old work wagon flying behind them. A little more and they would have cut him off. A carriage came toward him and rolled on by, moving smartly while the man on the seat leaned out and peered at him and the horses arched their heads and snorted.

It must be a far piece to the river, farther than he had

thought. The rifle jolted in his hands; the people and things apped against him. The air burned his throat as he moved in. Pap kept shouting, "Ketch 'em! Ketch 'em!" He looked back and saw them, a half a hundred men on the rail, and he knew how an old coon felt with the hunters inging after him. They would catch him yet before he dropped Old Sure Shot. They were at the cross street now, long with the carriage that had passed him. While he waited he mules charged out of the cross street.

He caught one glimpse of them, running hard and wild in the crowd, and heard the crowd's first shout rise. He brought his eyes around to get his bearings and saw a man in a red shirt jump from a doorway ahead of him and run into the street and stand ready for him. He was up for the catch. Boone kicked him in the groin and found his stride again and went on.

The street crossing behind him was a whirl of horses and men. He saw the mules, lunging away from the horse that reached for their heads. The carriage lay on its side with one wheel off. The men were shouting, daring to hold the teams. Nearer, the man Boone had kicked was jackknifed, his hands clutching his crotch. Pap appeared out of the crowd, his towed head shining white. His arms made motions, and his hoarse voice rose. He was running again, and part of the crowd fell in with him, taking up the chase. Boone made himself look away from them, made himself look ahead, made his legs work, striding long and hard while his breath whistled in his throat. He caught them it yet, thanks to the mules.

And then before him lay the Ohio, wide as an ocean. God, what a river! Under his feet the ground went wet and spongy, though the river was still a rifle shot away. Then the streamed past him, shaken by his stride, a storehouse tilting crazily, a flatboat overturned and gaping at the seams, drift lodged against the fronts of buildings, in and out of which men moved carrying buckets of mud. A load of new lumber

fist on the other. As if from a distance, while he bent to his oars, Boone heard Pap's "Come back, you tarnal fool!" It rose above the cries of the others, strained and sharp, and after it came another voice like a war whoop. "See you in St. Louis. Wait thar for me!" On the edge of the porch, waving his arms like a rooster, stood Jim Deakins, bareheaded, his sorrel hair whipping in the breeze.

The boat pulled like a mule, trying to get her head around and to run with the current. He fought her with all his strength, straining at the right-hand oar to keep her nosed up. He saw the shore backing away and realized the crowd had fallen silent and stood watchful and expecting. Deakins' voice floated out, "Take 'er easy! Watch you don't git rammed!"

The watchers lost outline, fading to a jerky shimmer of color as the stream caught him and bore him down. A half mile up the river they were now, though he was still within easy holler of the shore. The bank streamed past him and edged away by inches.

He felt the scrape of it on her side before it hit. The nose of the boat rose, slow at first, and then the whole craft pitched over. From the tail of his eye, as he snatched for his rifle, he glimpsed the log that had run him down. He came up gasping and kicked out, still headed for the farther shore. The boat was below him, turning bottom side up as it ran with the stream.

The water pulled at him. He felt the power of it from ankle to neck as he flattened and began to stroke, felt the pressure of it, the heavy, brute force of it all about him. The rifle was like a great sinker in his hand, but he hung to it, fighting with his other hand to keep up and going. The quick waves lapped at his face and head. The bigger ones washed over him. His pouch and horn trailed like an anchor under his belly. He strangled and went under and came up coughing water, thrashing out with his free arm. The hand struck something, struck and held while his nails bit for a hold.

He pulled up and rested, riding a soggy timber that floated low in the water. He brought his rifle to it and managed to lift it and work it onto the timber. Keeping the butt under one hand while the other clutched the far side of his raft, he started kicking again for the shore.

The river came out of its heavy flow and began to race. The timber swung around, and around again. Water swam in his sight, and the two shores and quick patches of sky before the timber settled again to the current like a mule to a lead rope.

Boone kept kicking, trying to keep pointed right, trying to push beyond the hold of the channel. It was a time before he realized that the current had changed and was washing over toward the Indiana shore. He locked his chin on the timber and hung there, numb, and after a while made his feet kick again, seeing only the rifle shining wet and dark on the wood and the water moving around him.

He knew when an Indiana farmer fished him out and got his arms around him from behind and dragged him to his cabin. He heard the man grunting over him. "Let 'er go, sonny! Your rifle will be safe as anything. Let 'er go!"

Chapter V

THE RIVER lay behind him, the river and the Indiana farmer who had put him up and had given him flint and steel, a horn of powder, a little poke of coarse meal, and a chunk of salt meat. "If you kin use that there rifle like she was made to be used, you'll make out," the farmer had said, and Boone had thanked him while he scuffed the ground with the toe of his boot. "Maybe it'll be turn about one day," he muttered. The farmer smiled and waved away the idea, and Boone turned and headed west out of the valley.

The land was flattening out. Back of him when the trees thinned he still could see the dark arches of the hills that flanked the river, but ahead the way was leveling, broken by low rolls covered with oak and maple and hackberry, and sycamore whose trunks stood out white and naked from the rest.

The air was heavy, the sky gray and cold like a winter's pond. The bare branches of the trees veined themselves against it, forking darkly down to the trunks.

Boone wondered how soon he could reach St. Louis. "Take a man a full week, likely, if he kep' at it," he said to himself, thinking ahead to beaver and buffalo and the free plains. The road was good. Once in a while he saw a cabin at the base of a hill or the edge of a grove and felt better for its company. Sometimes he met horsemen, and once a Conestoga wagon, crowded to the canvas, rolling on west.

"We'd lift ye, boy," the driver said through a mat of whiskers as the wagon drew abreast, "but we're so jam-packed we hadda make the bedbugs git out and walk." He added, "They're gonna be some sore-footed chinchies, time we get to Marthasville." The faces of a woman and two children, crowded to his left, made stiff smiles and sobered again as the driver swung his whip.

As it drew on toward dusk, Boone kept an eye out for game. He had seen a turkey earlier, and deer tracks at the side of the trail, but now the way was empty of game or sign of it. Overhead a V of wild geese drove to the north, high-flying and silent except for one inquiring honk that found no answer below. Then a rabbit bounced from roadside to bush and settled, its lines and color melting into the brown tangle of twig and blade and only the dark ball of its eye showing clear.

It was poor game, but Boone came up slow with his rifle so as not to scare it, remembering Pap's brag that if a man was sharp-eyed and steady he could knock out a possum's eye with Old Sure Shot, far as he could see it. The gun

ted the jug and motioned toward the fire. "Between this and that. Have another."

"Thanks again, mister."

Bedwell drank and put the jug on the ground. "I'll unsaddle my horse and picket him." He turned and went back. He and his horse were shadows moving at the edge of darkness. Boone put his rifle back against the tree and cut more meat. He turned the slices already on the stone. They were done when Bedwell returned carrying his rigging. Bedwell picked up the jug and offered it again.

After their meal they built up the fire and gathered more wood and settled on the ground. Bedwell's eyes were busy again. They gleamed wetly in the fire light. "I'm glad to see one man," he said, "that knows a cap and ball is better than a flintlock." He picked up the jug.

"Pan says so."

him. Boone saw its lining lift and flutter raggedly as the breeze touched it. His gaze swam forward to the beaver hat which Bedwell had placed between his feet, and saw that it was worn and soiled. Bedwell sat with his knees up, the tails of his cutaway spread back from his rump. His legs in their snug casings seemed spindly for the rest of him.

"So," Bedwell said, "you're bound west."

"To St. Louis first, and then on."

"Here's to good luck!" The jug gurgled as Boone took it.

"I aim to trap beaver and shoot buffalo and fight Indians, maybe. I kin shoot, all right."

"I'd take you for a marksman." The bare head moved and the creases deepened into a smile.

"I taken the eye right out of that rabbit."

"Light was bad, too, huh?"

"Dark-like. But I got him through the eye."

"You'll do." Bedwell got up and put more wood on the fire. "You'll make a mountain man."

The night closed in. There was the point of fire and Bedwell vague and swimming in its flicker, and close about them the wall of darkness. Boone let himself back and put his head on his arm.

"Haven't you got a blanket, friend?"

"No," Boone heard himself say, "nary blanket." He heard the whisper of the tight legs, heard the boots cracking the twigs, heard the small noises of movement. The earth swung with him. Then there were the noises again, the whisper, the crackling, and Bedwell's voice. "You use my blanket." Boone felt it fan the air against his cheek. It settled over him. "I'll keep the fire going. With it and my coat I'll be warm aplenty. Here's your rifle, friend. Keep it by your side. How about a nightcap?"

Boone awakened sick and trembling with cold flush of the morning. He felt for the blanket, finding it, sat up slowly. The fire was a gray ash, cook-rock had fallen and lay half buried. The

a tuft of rabbit hair across it. He tasted his mouth and made a face and brought his fingers to his eyes to rub the film away. He looked around for Bedwell. He must have gone to see about his horse, he thought. His hand felt at his side, felt and reached out and felt again. Each finger carried its small sharp message to him. Without looking, he knew that Old Sure Shot was gone.

Chapter VI

BOONE got up quickly. The earth tilted and fell back and tilted again, and he bent over and put his hands to his head and closed his eyes to steady himself. He went over the ground, from creek to campfire to bedding spot, and finally to the place where Bedwell had picketed his horse. He found rope marks on a small elm there and saw the grass trampled by hoofs and flattened where the horse had lain. From a pile of manure a faint steam lifted.

He went back to the stream and lay down and drank, feeling the cool touch of the water to the pit of his stomach. He got up slowly, keeping his uneasy balance with the earth, and suddenly his stomach tightened like a squeezed bag. Holding to a bush, he hung over and vomited. The night's whisky was foul in his mouth. He rubbed the tears from his cheeks and picked up his poke of meal, dropping the bit of meat into it. "Goddam him!" he said aloud.

The morning mists were rising. Above the knobs to the east the sun appeared, its shine spread out and heatless. A lean hog nosed into the clearing and halted, its round snout twitching as it sampled the air. "Git!" said the boy, and it gave a grunt and lumbered off.

Boone lagged to the trail and stopped and looked back. Home seemed a far piece now, beyond the knobs, beyond

the great river, through the hills. His ma would be wondering about him, he reckoned. Maybe she grieved, hearing from Pap that the river must have got him. Maybe she said, "Boone! Boone!" to herself while her wet eyes leaked over. Of a sudden, weakness came on him again, taking the strength out of him and the grit. It wasn't any use trying to run away. Everywhere people picked on a boy, chasing after him like they'd chase a wild brute, or playing friendly and stealing from him. Better to go back to Ma and let Pap beat on him. Better to have something to eat and a home to lie in. Only, the law was after him now, and maybe home would be the jailhouse, and Pap would want to kill him, or come nigh to it. He straightened. Anyhow, he'd even things with Bedwell. He aimed to get Old Sure Shot back one way or another. He turned around and started west again, his head pounding to his step, his eyes following the horse tracks on the trail.

Boone wondered about Jim Deakins. Had Jim crossed the river? Would he really come? He saw the open, friendly face, the sorrel beard sprouting, the mild blue eyes. A man got lonesome, all by himself in a strange country. When Boone saw a gristmill, though, and the miller busy with his sacks, he put his head down and passed on, only muttering to the friendly hail. The few houses along the road he passed by, too, indrawn and distrustful. A lean brown and white dog ran out from one of them, nagging at his heels, and he turned and kicked at it, ignoring the promise of a man at the door who called, "He won't bite ye, boy."

He was in country different from home. The hills were smaller and more rounded, and there were more oaks and beech groves, but there were hickories, too, and walnuts, elms, wild cherries, and a few pines. In the smaller growth he made out dogwood, pawpaws, thorns, and persimmons. If it happened to be fall, now, he could find ripe pawpaws aplenty and shake himself down a bellyful of persimmons. He had ought to eat, regardless. Pap alwa

good for whisky fever. Not pawpaws or persimmons, though. They gagged a man, just thinking about them. Ham and parched corn and shucky beans would go better, and fresh meat better yet. If he had Old Sure Shot he could get himself some meat. Just having Old Sure Shot, without the meat, would make him feel tolerable—just having it, without the horn and pouch that Bedwell had stolen, too.

It was still early when he caught sight of a town and stopped to consider. If he circled it he might lose Jonathan Bedwell's trail, might pass him by while he was tied up at an inn. But he pulled away from the thought of entering the place, of being looked at and questioned and circled around with strangers' ways. He would eat first, anyway. Maybe eating would take the ache out of his head. Behind a small growth that screened him from the trail he built a fire and made more journey cakes and warmed two slices of his fat meat and choked the food down, against the uneasy turning of his stomach. When he got up he struck in an arc around the town.

Beyond it the road was marked more by hoofs and wheels. No longer could he feel sure that it was the tracks of Bedwell's horse he saw. There were a half-dozen sets of fresh tracks, now separate, now mixed, now blurred by the ribbon marks of tires. Boone faced toward the town, thinking again that he ought to go into it and shrinking from it again.

He traveled all day, walking even-timed, thinking now about Ma and now about Deakins and now about Bedwell and always about his stolen rifle. It hung in his mind, pulling him on. Somewhere he would come up on Bedwell. Some way he would get his gun back. The sun let itself down from overhead and looked him in the face and went on, sliding behind the far hills. He passed a two-story log house set back from the trail, and beyond it saw a lone hen pecking in the road. He looked back to see if anybody watched, then reached into his poke and drew out a handful of meal. He moved off the trail, to a tree that hid him from the house,

nd began scattering his hand of bait, singing a soft "Here, huck, chuck, chuckie! Here, chuck, chuck, chuckie!" Twenty feet away, the hen canted her head and fixed one bright eye on him. She came over, waddling and suspicious, and took a long-necked peck at the nearest fleck of corn. Boone wung his hand slowly, letting the meal sift from his fingers. She tilted her head at him again, studying him for danger. He fanned out another pinch. The eye left him and fixed on the ground and the head went down with a jerk and the beak picked up another crumb, and another, and another. The neck stretched for more, and one foot moved the hungry beak ahead. "Chuck, chuckie!" The other foot moved, and then the first, while the beak did its tiny beat. Boone fell forward, smothering the bird in his arms. She started a wild outcry, but his quick fist choked it off, and she stared at him, silent and lidless and fearful, as he brought her under his arm.

He scanned the back trail again and struck off to the right toward a bunch of locusts. Through the trees he saw a sinkhole, and in the steep and rocky farther side a black triangle that he took to be the entrance to a cave. He let himself down into the sinkhole, skirted the puddle at its bottom, and climbed the small bluff and looked in. At its beginning the cave was big enough to hold a man, standing or lying. He squinted into it, and as his eyes widened saw that it choked off into two small tunnels. The place had the rank, sour smell of vixens and pups, but the floor was smooth, and the walls and roof would protect him from the night's wet chill.

Boone climbed down, took the hen from under his arm and tore her head off. While she fluttered he gathered firewood and placed it inside the cave. He kindled a small fire just inside the entrance, watching with satisfaction the slow breath of the cavern carried the smoke out.

At the edge of the puddle he dressed himself through with a length of green sapling.

rested the sapling in the forks of two sticks raised at the sides of the blaze and made solid with stones. He went into the cave and sat down to wait, eased by the warmth that had begun to creep inside. It was good to rest, to let his muscles hang loose and aimless, to feel hunger in his stomach again, to be shut of the dizzy ache in his head. There seemed nothing so bad with him now that getting his gun back wouldn't fix it. He turned the bird on its spit.

He ate half the half-raw hen. Afterwards he restrung the carcass on the sapling and leaned the sapling against the side of the cave. He renewed his fire and lay down, and a dead sleep closed on him.

Morning came wet and dismal. He sat up and rubbed his eyes and squirmed the crimps from his muscles. He could hear rain on the stones, dropping from ledge to ledge. He looked out and saw the sky close and gray, with tatters of rain clouds beating low before the breeze. Inside the cave it was dry and windless. He felt a small, quick pleasure at being there. It would be good to stay, safe and sheltered, while the day made its gloomy turn.

He took the body of the hen from its stick and began to wrench at it with his teeth. There wasn't much left, even for a fox, when he got through. He picked up his poke and set out, hunched against the rain. By the time he hit the road he was wet to the skin but warm from moving. Ahead of him the way ran, to Paul, Vincennes, St. Louis. He walked at its side, out of the mud, studying the tracks for some sign that Bedwell had gone before him. After a while the sun came out.

The day was drawing on to noon when he spied the man in the black coat. The man was sitting a horse which he had pulled up at the top of a rise, sitting there motionless, looking off to the north, thinking, or watching something, or waiting for somebody. While Boone paused, the man's hand went inside his coat and came out with a pistol. Boone slipped to one side of the trail behind a tree. Still holding

lined face. Boone saw Old Sure Shot, tied to the saddle. He lay there until the horse and man had passed him and lost themselves in the woods ahead, reminding himself as they went by that a man couldn't outrun a horse or go up against a rifle unarmed, either. Then he got up and set out after them, trotting to keep close.

He came on Bedwell suddenly an hour later. Making a turn at the edge of a grove that had hidden the way, he saw the horse drinking at a creek that crossed the road, and Bedwell on the ground with his back toward him, flicking his snug leg with the switch he carried in his hand. They were no more than a stone's throw away. While Boone watched, Bedwell opened his breeches and made water, buttoning up slowly afterwards.

Now was the time, Boone told himself, but careful, careful! His hand dropped the poke. He felt his legs running under him and a breeze fanning his face. His feet kicked up a noise in the road. Bedwell straightened his trousers and turned and saw him and set himself, waiting, not trying to get the rifle from the saddle. He stood there and met the charge, and they went down, rolling into the little stream and out of it. Boone heard the horse snort and saw the hoofs dance away. He felt the man's hand slip under his cap and clamp on his hair. The other hand came up and the thumb of it found Boone's eye, and now the two hands worked together, the one holding his head while the thumb of the second pushed into the socket. Pain was like a knife turning in his skull. The eye started from its hole. He let go of Bedwell's throat and tore himself free and scrambled to his feet. Bedwell stood blurred before him, stood dripping, his lips a little open, not saying anything, the lines making small half circles at the corners of his mouth. His eyes studied Boone. Boone lunged in, swinging at the face. Bedwell's knee jerked up, and his hands pushed Boone away as if the last lick had been struck. Boone doubled and stumbled

back. A straining noise came out of his throat. He tried to straighten against the fierce pain in his groin.

"Well?" asked Bedwell. His hand brushed at the mud on his coat.

"You taken my rifle!"

"So?"

"I aim to git it back."

"Aim ahead."

"I ain't through yit."

Bedwell's eyes slid off Boone, looking over his shoulder, and a sudden glint came into them that Boone did not understand. He was smiling now, smiling on one side of his face. "Afraid, aren't you, pup?"

Boone's shoulder caught him in the chest. The man went over, easy this time, with Boone on top of him. The strength seemed to have drained out of Bedwell. He tried to squirm from under and fell back, grunting. His hands fluttered, fending Boone's thumbs from his eyes. He was yelling, making a roar in Boone's ears. "Help! Help!" Boone got his hand beneath the flutter. His thumb poked for an eye. It had just found it when a voice like a horn sounded. "Stop it, damn you! Stop it!"

A hand grabbed Boone's shoulder and jerked him loose. The man in the black coat stood over him, and now Boone saw there was a star on the coat. "I'm the sheriff."

"Thank God, sheriff!" It was Bedwell speaking. He got to his feet and picked his white hat from the water and brushed at it. "He would have killed me." He pointed at Boone. "Must be crazy."

The sheriff's gaze went to Boone. "I seen him afore, sneak-in' through the woods."

"He slipped up on me. I was letting my horse drink, and he charged me from behind."

"What's the idee, boy?" the sheriff asked, and answered his own question. "Robbery, that's what." His eyes went to Bedwell's horse, standing hip-shot across the creek. "Wanted

Eggleston," he said, "if you're through with your funnin'," and the cold-eyed man said, "Come around, sheriff."

The sheriff handed Old Sure Shot to another man and came over and sat down in a chair beside the judges' bench, facing the crowd.

Eggleston asked, "You are Mark York, sheriff of Orange county?"

"Sure."

A thumb motioned toward Boone. "Ever see this defendant before?"

"Sure."

"When and where?"

"First time, he went sneakin' around me, on the Greenville road. That was about noon."

"What were you doing there?"

"Matt Elliott got a cow stole. I was coming from there."

"What do you mean when you say he sneaked around you?"

"He left the road and circled behind me. I just got a flash of him makin' off."

"Do you know any reason why he would want to sneak by you?"

Squire Beecher jumped up. "Objection!"

Eggleston said, "Oh, all right," and went on. "When did you see him for the second time?"

"Up the road a piece. He had this here gentleman down and was gougin' him."

"They were fighting?"

"Sure."

"Who would you say was the aggressor?"

"This young feller here was on top."

Squire Beecher cried "Objection!" again. Judge Test looked at him, then said, "This court isn't going to tie itself up with a lot of fiddle-faddle. It's the truth we want. Go ahead, Eggleston."

"And you brought them in?"

Beecher asked, "Did you say you had never seen this boy before?"

"Never."

Beecher aimed a finger at Bedwell. "But, as a matter of fact, you shared his supper with him night before last, didn't you?"

"No."

"You shared his supper with him and spent the night at his campfire, and you got up early, while the boy still slept, and made off with his rifle and horn and pouch, didn't you?"

"No. I did not."

Eggleston interrupted. "The state objects to this line of questioning."

"Go on," said Judge Test to Beecher.

"And the boy attacked you just in the hope of getting his rifle back?"

"It wasn't his rifle."

The questions went on. Through a window Boone could see a tavern across the street and, at the side of it and farther on, the wooded knobs lifting to the horizon. He thought of the cave where he had spent the night, and the rain whispering on the rocks while he stayed dry inside.

"That's all," said Beecher. Bedwell started to get up, but Eggleston motioned him back. Eggleston's thin mouth worked carefully. "Just a minute. Can you identify the rifle?"

"Of course. It was made by old Ben Mills at Harrodsburg, Kentucky. I bought it from him."

"Sheriff," Eggleston asked, "bring the rifle around, will you?" He looked at the piece, held it for Beecher's inspection and then handed it to the jurymen. It made the rounds among them while they nodded their heads. The prosecutor let himself smile.

Squire Beecher was on his feet. "Wait! Wait!" His finger leveled at Bedwell. "You could have memorized

name of the maker after you had stolen the rifle, couldn't you?"

"Yes," said Bedwell. "If I had stolen it."

"As a matter of fact, that would probably be the first thing you would do, wouldn't it?" asked Beecher, his eyes going from one juror to another. They looked at him and looked away, as if they couldn't be jarred loose from an idea.

Bedwell said, "Probably. If I had stolen it."

Eggleston pointed his lean face at the bench. "That's the case."

Squire Beecher turned to Boone. "All right," he said. His finger showed the way to the witness stand.

Boone got up and went over and sat down. At one side of him were the jurors, at the other the judges' bench. In front of him were the attorneys and Bedwell and the clerk with his big book and pen, and beyond them the townspeople, staring at him, turning to talk behind shielding hands *out of eager, curling mouths. The eyes came together on him, as if everything was just one big eye and he was all there was to see.* Only the Indian sat quiet, looking at him out of eyes that caught a gleam from the window, his hands idle in his lap, holding the moccasins. He wouldn't be a real western Indian, but a Miami, or maybe a Pottawatomie. Far back in the room a man was smiling at Boone, like a body would smile at a friend. In the whole passel of faces his was the only friendly one, unless it would be the Indian's.

"What is your name?" asked Beecher.

"Boone Caudill."

"In your own words," said Beecher quietly, "will you tell the court about your fight this morning and the circumstances surrounding it?"

"It's my gun. He stoled it."

"Wait a minute, now. Start at the first."

"I was fixin' my supper——"

"When and where?"

"Night before yistiddy. Down the road a piece."

"The other side of Greenville?"

"I reckon so."

"Go on."

Boone made a little gesture at Bedwell. "He came ridin' up."

"Yes?"

"He gave me his name and asked if he could put up, too."

"Yes?"

"Come mornin', he was gone, and the rifle to boot."

"And so," said Squire Beecher, "when you came upon him today you tried to get your rifle back?"

"Yes."

Eggleston barked, "Objection!"

"Quit coachin' him," ordered Judge Test.

"That's the way it was," Boone said.

"Can you identify the rifle?"

"Ben Mills made it, at Harrodsburg."

Squire Beecher got up. "Your honors," he said, while a frown wrinkled his face, "we believe a motion for dismissal is in order. As to the identification of the gun, the court simply has a contradiction, without supporting evidence on either side. Neither does the charge of assault and battery stand up. There again the court has a contradiction, and the testimony of the sheriff on the one side does nothing to enforce the accusation. The sheriff simply saw the men fighting. Any conclusion he has drawn or implied is pure assumption, without weight before the law. The only thing of actual proof is that a fight took place."

Eggleston had arisen, protesting. "We want to cross-examine the witness."

Judge Test waved them both back. "Go on, then," he said to the prosecutor, but Squire Beecher said, "Wait, your honor. We're not through." His eyes came back to Boone. "Have you any other way of identifying the rifle? Are there

any other marks on it, or scratches that would identify it?"

"It's got nary scratch on it."

Squire Beecher rested his chin on his fist. His eyes studied the table in front of him. "Maybe," he said after a pause, "you can establish your claim to the rifle through the horn or pouch." His head came up. "How many bullets in the pouch?"

"There was eleven, and I shot a rabbit. Ten, there would be."

Beecher motioned, and the sheriff brought over the pouch. Eggleston came and stood over Beecher as Beecher emptied the pouch on the table. "One, two, three . . ."

Eggleston broke in, "There's eight. Just eight."

Beecher's hand fumbled in the pouch and came out empty. "Of course," he said to Boone, "anyone who stole it could have fired it a couple of times, couldn't he?"

Eggleston looked down at Beecher, grinning, and said, "I ought to object. You're coaching him again." He went back over to his seat, still grinning.

Beecher said, "That's all."

Judge Test's red face turned on Eggleston. "Go on."

Eggleston leaned forward toward Boone, like a snake with a stand on a bird. "How long have you owned this rifle?"

"A spell."

"How long?"

Boone heard the pen scratching as the man at the little table wrote in the big book. It scratched and stopped, and he saw the pen raised, waiting. From the back of the room the man still smiled at him, like someone who was on his side.

"I asked how long. Good Lord, boy, if the rifle is yours you must know how long you've owned it."

"I couldn't rightly say as to that."

"Oh, you couldn't rightly say. Where did you get the rifle, anyway? Is it really yours?"

The pen was scratching again, and stopping again. Boone

felt his hands knotted between his knees. His tongue came out and wet his lips.

Eggleston yelled, "Is it?" and pounded on the table with his fist.

"Your honors," Squire Beecher complained, "we object that the questioning amounts to abuse."

"He won't answer."

The judge's red eyes rested on Boone. "Boy, a defendant can't be made to incriminate himself—but I'll have to warn ye, if you don't answer, the jury's most likely to hold it against you."

Boone said, "My Pap gave it to me."

The prosecutor's hand fiddled with his chin. After a silence he said, "How old are you, boy?"

"Comin' eighteen."

"You're seventeen then." Eggleston's light eyes studied him. "You're a runaway, aren't you?"

Boone heard Beecher cry "Objection!" and Judge Test answer, "He's cross-examinin'."

"Where you from?"

Boone brought his hands from between his knees and took hold of the bottom of his chair. "St. Louis."

"What are you doing here?"

"Goin' back."

"From where?"

"Around."

"Just around, eh?"

"Reckon so."

in the crowd and a shifting of butts on the benches. They sat forward, as if this was what they had been waiting for. While Boone looked, the man in the back nodded his head, as if to say everything would be all right.

"You can come here," Squire Beecher said, not unkindly, and Boone left the witness chair and sat at the table by him.

Beecher got up and stepped over in front of the jury and began to talk. His voice, lighter than Eggleston's, seemed to turn on and off like a spigot as he faced one way and then another. It was a sight, the way his pigtail joggled. Beyond him, through the window, was the tavern and, farther on, the woods against the sky and the sky itself clear and blue as water. Boone made out a bird against it, probably just a buzzard, but sailing free and easy like keeping up was no trick at all. The spigot turned on and off. "Only one man's word . . . No case has been proved . . . All that has been shown, all you can be sure of, is that a fight took place . . . In the circumstances you must resolve the doubt in favor of the defendant . . ." Out beyond the pole everybody was looking at Beecher, except when he pointed, and then the eyes all moved over, as if they were on a string, and bored at Boone. And everybody was listening, too, and sometimes smiling and sometimes frowning, and whispering once in a while. Maybe a man would find it easy enough to listen, to keep his mind to what was being said, if he was out there. Maybe it was right pleasant, watching and listening and not having fingers aimed at you and eyes putting holes through you, knowing you could get up and go any time you wanted to, to St. Louis or wherever. ". . . this innocent and friendless boy . . ." He didn't want anyone to be friends, unless it was Jim Deakins. And he wasn't a boy, but a man, growed and out on his own. ". . . ask the jury in its wisdom and mercy to return a verdict of acquittal."

Beecher was sweating when he sat down.

Eggleston lifted himself from his chair and went over toward the jury with his hands in his pockets and his head

down. When he got there, though, the hands came out and the head lifted. His voice was loud, so that Boone could hear it plain, if he set himself to listening, no matter how Eggleston faced. Eggleston marched back and forth in front of the jurymen, his arms swinging. Once in a while he turned and pointed and fixed Boone with his whitish eyes. and, when he did, his voice boomed in Boone's ears, saying "ragged rascal" and "plain piece of banditry" and "murderous tramp." When he turned back his words hit the wall first and seemed to run like echoes in the room. Beyond him, way beyond him, the buzzard was still circling. Light as a feather, not moving its wings but just tilting. round and round, with the wind. Words came at Boone again. The rocks being pitched. He felt the eyes on him and he was trying to be small inside his clothes. "I submit gentlemen that you can come to only one verdict, and that is the verdict of guilt." The arm swung over, like a loose limb in the wind. "Look at him! Look him over well! Ask yourselves what a man like this—" a finger pecked at his chest—"would be doing with a piece like that." Then it was the echo again, bouncing from the wall. "The jurymen, gentlemen, I leave to your good judgment."

Eggleston turned around and went to the door. Squire Beecher a smile on the way. They were pretty good friends outside of —

smile, Boone could see now, smiling without meaning, out of an idiot's face. Before he passed through the door he turned and stuck his tongue out at Boone. Bedwell tidied his beaver and after a final look around left the courtroom. Judge Test came down from the bench and cut himself a chew of tobacco. He and the sheriff began to chaff.

After while the sheriff said, "This was 'just a one-drink case." He motioned out the window, to the jury coming from the tavern. Beecher shook his head but didn't say anything.

The jurymen lagged in. Judge Test lifted himself back on the platform and sat at the bench pulling at his dew-laps. The pale judge sat with his jaw in his hand. His eyes opened slowly as the jury tramped by him. The clerk came and sat down before his book.

"Gentlemen, have you come to a decision?"

One of the jurors got up and stood framed in the window, shutting out the woods and the sky and the bird soaring. "We have."

"Let the court hear it."

"Judge, your honor, we say the boy's guilty, but not too orful guilty."

The judge pursed his lips while his red eyes waited on the speaker.

"We figger," said the juror, "that he'll have to work it out, if'n you fine him, so we say about five dollars, or seven days."

Judge Test whispered to the pale judge and they both nodded, and Judge Test said, "Let it be seven days." The clerk's pen scratched in his book. To Eggleston Judge Test added, "That'll give you time enough to run him down."

Boone felt the hand of the sheriff on his arm. "Come along!" Eggleston looked up as they were about to pass him. "Maybe you can get something out of him, sheriff." One cold eye winked. The sheriff said, "Sure." As he passed

out the door he said to the little man named Charlie, "Git Little Betsy, will you?"

The jail was a log cabin with a heavy oak door. The sheriff sprang the lock with a rusty key. It was a big lock, as big as a terrapin. For a minute Boone couldn't make things out after he had got inside. Then he saw a plank bunk with a ragged cover on it, and a broken table, on which a half-burned candle was stuck.

A voice outside said, "Here's Betsy." The sheriff said, "Thanks. Watch the door." The door whined as it closed.

The sheriff was a big man, tall and bony, with a look of power about him. Boone hadn't noticed before how stiff his face could be. It was like a rock face, like Pap's when the devil got in him.

"Time we get well acquainted," said the sheriff, "maybe you'll feel more like talkin'." The right hand came away from his side, holding something that for a minute dragged on the floor. "Turn around!"

Boone cried, "You ain't going to whale me, mister!"

Before he had finished, the whip whistled.

Chapter VIII

"GIDDAP, old boy, giddap, giddap."

JIM Deakins timed his words to the pace of the horse under him, kicking the horse's belly when he got too poky. He was over the river at last, after waiting two days for the water to go down and the ferryman's courage to rise. Even then he had had to pay an extra dollar to get the ferryman to put out. His two mules were gone, and the old work wagon. In their place he had a horse and a bit of money in his pocket. "Giddap, giddap."

He hadn't found any trace of Boone yet. No one had seen

him. A tall, dark boy? No. Carrying a rifle? No. Seventeen or eighteen, going to St. Louis? Nope. Nope. Ain't seed such a boy. He wondered if the river had got Boone after all. From the shore they had seen the boat turn over and the head bob and then go out of sight, but a man's head was a little thing to see in the water such a piece away. Boone looked strong, and stout-winded as a pup. He was a good swimmer, likely.

Jim had bought his horse after the ferry had put him off, and had ridden down the Indiana shore, looking, but there wasn't anyone to home at the one likely place, and instead of waiting he had returned to the road and struck out, figuring if Boone had got across he was already on his way to St. Louis.

"Seed a boy go by here, mister, last two or three days, goin' west, afoot?"

The man at the cabin dumped his bucket of slop water and stood straight. "Don't reckon I have."

"Alf, we did so, don't you recollect?" There was a woman at the door, talking shrill. The baby in her arms began to cry. Alf scratched his head.

"When might it be, Missus?"

Before she answered, she brought out a breast and gave it to the baby, saying, "There, will you quit your squallin'?" She wiped the hair from her eyes. "Lemme see. Was it yesterday or day before, Alf? I swear, a body gets mixed up on time. What was it, Alf?"

"Time don't matter so much, just so's he went by."

"He did that, didn't he, Alf? You recollect?" She looked at Jim. "He's awful forgetful, but he seed him all right."

Alf said, "A boy, afoot? He don't come to mind." He put the bucket down and looked up and down the road, as if he might see Boone now. "Reckon Ma's right. She's mighty noticin'."

"I'm obliged to ye." Jim kicked the old horse.

"What time o' day?"

"Round about this time. No, come to think on it, it was earlier." The miller spit out a husk. "Runaway?"

Jim shook his head. "He's my brother. I'm just tryin' to catch up. This the road to Paoli?"

"One of 'em."

Jim grinned at him. "One at a time is a plenty. Obligated." The miller stood in the doorway, chewing on his corn, as the horse plodded away.

Farther on, a dog ran out from a house and planted himself with his legs wide apart, barking. "Anyone to home?" The door of a shed whined open. A man came out and leaned on a manure fork. He'd seen a boy, yesterday, a mean boy who kicked at his dog and went on without a how-de-do. Rifle? No, he didn't have a rifle, just a little sack. It wasn't until Jim rode away that it occurred to him Boone wouldn't have his rifle. A man couldn't swim carrying a gun.

Jim bought himself a bite to eat at the store in Greenville. The storekeeper hadn't seen a tall, dark, plain-dressed boy? The man rested his hands on the counter and shook his head while his mouth came out like a snout. 'Course, he could have missed him. A store job was half bending over, lifting and opening. A lot of folks went by a body didn't see.

At the tavern across the road they hadn't seen Boone either. He hadn't been in there, hadn't passed by, as far they knew.

Jim went to the hitch rack and untied his horse and mounted and rode on, wondering. There wasn't any place for a man to lose himself between the mill and town.

He put up at a farmhouse that night and rode on the next morning in the rain. The farmer had given him a square of canvas to drape across his back, and the rain pattered on it and ran down and wet the saddle and the sad-

dle wet his breeches. He would be something to see when he got off the horse, with his seat sopping as a baby's.

Along toward the middle of the day the rain let up, and the sun got itself from behind the clouds. Jim heard a red-bird whistle. It was a prime day for going west, after all, he decided. If only he could find Boone, everything would be slick. Anyone taken notice of a boy, hoofin' it? Could be they missed him. Could be he went by early, or after dark. Giddap! Giddap!

It was growing dark when he arrived at Paoli. He reined up to a tavern and hitched his horse next to a chestnut standing with his head down. Under an antlered skull wired to a board above the door a sign said "White Stag Tavern." There was a bar inside, and a fireplace and tables and chairs, and a little white-haired man with a stomach like a melon who came from behind the bar, his eyes saying, "Well?"

"Kin you put me up?"

"Supper, breakfast, bed, one dollar, hard money."

"I got a horse outside."

"Twenty-five cents more. Hay and a feed of corn."

Jim got out his money. "When's supper?"

"Directly. Your room's first door to the right, upstairs. There's a place to wash in back. You can see the backhouse from there. Make yourself to home."

Jim looked around. An old man sat in a chair by the fireplace, holding a paper that trembled in his hand. His cane was angled against the chair.

The little man went back behind the bar and started to wrestle with a keg.

"I better have a drink," Jim said.

"Whisky? Common, rectified, or Monongahela?"

"Common'll do." Jim leaned against the bar, picked up his whisky and tasted it while his eyes held the little man's attention. "Been a boy by here, last day or two, seventeen-eighteen year old?"

The little man stood still. His hands settled on the bar, and his eyes went blank as a dead fish's, as if he were waiting. "Might be," he said.

The old man in the chair rustled his paper. "'Course we seen such a boy, Shorty," he said in a voice sharp and high with age. "He's the one in the jailhouse. Where's your mind gone?"

Jim turned half around. The old man's eyes looked at him over the edge of his paper. The old man's voice asked, "You run into trouble, too?"

Jim said, "No. No trouble."

"What might the boy be like?" Shorty asked.

"You seen him, Shorty," the old man persisted. "Tall, he is, and got a deep, mean look in his eye."

Jim shook his head and sipped again at his whisky. "Mine's middlin'." Shorty was looking at the old man. "Middlin', with a blue eye, and like as not whistlin'. He whistles all the time, like a bird."

The old man said, "'Tain't this 'un, by a damn sight. This 'un tried to rob a man. Went after his horse and rifle. He pounded him around some, too."

"So?"

"That's a fact. There's the rifle, standin' in the corner."

Jim took his glass and walked over to the corner. His eyes went to the gun, studied it, slid to the little man, and came back to the rifle again.

"What did the boy allow?"

The old man answered. "Said the rifle was his'n. Said the man snatched it. He was lyin'."

"What might be the name of the boy you're lookin' for?" Shorty asked.

Jim drained his glass before he answered. "William. Bill Williams. Give me another, will you, mister? He'll be along. He's around somewheres, askin' about mules."

"Mules?"

"Mules." Jim nodded his head and kept his eyes on his

refilled glass while Shorty's gaze questioned him. Finally Shorty said, "No mules for sale around here. None that I know of." He turned and gave his attention to the keg again.

"That's the man's horse, outside," the old man volunteered.

"So? Reckon they'll put the boy away for a spell."

"Court's already sat. Seven days. They think he's a run-away. That'll give 'em time to see." The old man's head went behind his paper.

Shorty had the keg in its standard now, and the spigot driven in. He looked up as the door creaked open. "Evenin'. See the door's closed, will you? Damn that dog!"

"Whisky, Shorty."

The customer lifted his drink and looked at it and downed it all at once, with a snap of his head. He paid for it and went out, giving no attention to the dog that had followed him in.

The dog sniffed at the corner of the bar, and the little man called Shorty leaned over and yelled, "No, you don't! Goddam you, Curly Locks, git away from there!" It was a big brown dog, furred from toenails to topknot with long, slim rings of hair that joggled when he walked.

Jim said, "I never seed a dog like that."

"Never will another time," Shorty promised. "That there's a piss hound."

"Never heerd of such."

"He's the only one. He ain't mine, but he comes in here a hunderd times a day, and, first off, he makes for the corner there and gives it a smell, and up comes his leg."

"So?"

"Look!" said the little man. "He kin come in here and sprinkle and I put him out, and directly someone lets him in, and what you think?"

Jim shook his head.

"By God, he goes right there and smells again, and don't

even recognize hisself, from just a wink before. So up his leg comes. . . ." The little man trailed off.

"Why'n't you knock him one on the head?"

"He belongs to the sheriff."

The old man rustled his paper. From behind it he said, "And the sheriff leaves money aplenty here."

Shorty came from behind the bar and put the dog out. "Take a chair. Time Ma had supper ready." He went through a door. Jim heard him say, "Ready, Ma? Good God, what you been doin'?"

A woman's voice answered, hot and high-pitched. "You git back in there, Shorty Carey. I been workin', that's what, workin' and wearin' my fingers to a nub while you're in there drammin'. Supper'll be ready when it's suppertime."

Shorty came back, shaking his head. "Maybe you want to wash first. There's time to put up your horse. You'll see the barn. Take the third stall."

"I'll let the horse go for a spell. Reckon I could stand a wash, though."

When Jim came back, a table had been set and bowls of food were sending up little clouds of vapor. Three men were at the table. One of them had on a black coat on which a metal star shone. The other wore a cutaway and had dropped a gray greatcoat over the back of his chair. The third was the old man who had been reading a paper. His hand shook with age as it carried food to his mouth. Shorty motioned Jim to a chair at the table. "Set up and eat." A woman in an apron came from the kitchen, carrying more food.

The men looked at Jim as he sat down. "Evenin'," he said. The sheriff had a bruise under one eye, which would get black, likely. The man in the cutaway said, "Good evening."

Jim realized, when the sheriff turned to speak to him, that the man had some drinks under his belt. "I don't recollect seein' you around before."

"First time."

"Passin' through?" The sheriff's eyes questioned him. Jim asked, "Heerd what St. Louis's offerin' for mules?" The old man said, "Plenty. Got some?"

"I know where some are, anyways. If it was me, I'd have a piece of meat on that there eye, sheriff."

"Don't amount to nothin'." He said to his companion, "That boy fit, Bedwell, like a b'ar, as I been tellin' you. Jesus!"

They were quiet for a while, and then the sheriff added, "He ain't going to feel so pert tomorrow. Second day's the worst, by a whole lot."

"Get anything from him?" Bedwell asked.

"Not more'n two or three words, and they was cuss words. A little more leather'll loosen his tongue."

The sheriff pushed his plate away from him. His voice rolled out strong as any hound's. "Bring a *bottle* over, Shorty. I can spit more'n your glasses hold."

Shorty filled a bottle from a keg. He brought it over, and two glasses with it. "Drink?" the sheriff asked of Jim, as if he didn't mean it. "Not now. Obligated." The old man got up, clearing his throat, and went back to his chair by the fireplace.

As the sheriff poured the drinks Bedwell said, "I got no business idlin' here thisaway, sheriff. It's the company, I reckon."

The door at the front opened, and Curly Locks came in behind the man who had opened it. The dog eased over to the corner of the bar. Shorty came from the kitchen just then and said "Git!" and made as if to kick him, and Curly Locks dropped his leg and backed up. He padded over to Jim, his tongue rolling out of the side of his mouth, and stopped while Jim's hand rubbed his ears.

"Shorty's awful damn particular," the sheriff said, refilling the glasses. "Won't let my dog piss on his bar, but what he sells you out of his bar'ls is the same stuff."

Shorty grunted.

Bedwell got out a pipe and puffed on it slow and deep. Jim leaned over and talked to the dog while he scratched the furry head. The sheriff, by littles, was getting quiet with the drink in him. His eyes were unwinking and fixed, and Jim could tell he wasn't seeing anything, except what was in his mind. He just grunted and went on drinking and staring when two more men came in and walked over to him. One of them said, "Hear you're still champeen, sheriff." When he didn't answer they went to the bar.

By and by the sheriff said, "I ought to take some supper to that there boy." His hand reached into the pocket of his black coat and came out with a key through which a whang was looped. It was a long, rusty key, which the sheriff kept turning under his thumbs, looking at it but not really seeing it. "Serve him right if I left him empty." He put down the key and lifted his glass, and then put the glass down and picked the key up and fiddled with it some more.

"Why not?" asked Bedwell.

"Got to keep him strong, so's he can work on the road."

It was a big key, too big to hide easy, even if a man could sneak it off the table. Jim's hand explored Curly Lock's head.

"I ought to take him some victuals." The sheriff didn't move, except to fill his glass.

Might be a man could slip the whang around the dog's neck and make an excuse to go out, whispering Curly Locks out with him. But it was risky. Like as not someone would see the key dangling. Jim's hand pulled a curl out to its full length. The key would show some, for all that hair.

The sheriff felt of his eye again. Jim could see his eyeballs were getting red. Bedwell was humming a little song to himself. The key was out on the table, the whang lying in a circle from it. Wouldn't do to ask about the key. Wouldn't do to eye it too much.

Jim got up and strolled to the bar and bought himself a

drink, and then went out to the backhouse. Sometimes a man could think best when his breeches were down, he reflected as he lowered himself. What if he started a blaze in the privy and went running in yelling fire? No good. A man didn't have no excuse for firing a privy. What if he touched off the tavern? Jesus, they'd lock a man away for a coon's age if they caught him.

He went back in the tavern. The sheriff was still slouched in his chair, looking sleepy and kind of loose. There was the key on the table, caught in its circle of thong. Bedwell was at the bar, talking with three men. Curly Locks came over and smelled of Jim when he came in and followed along to a chair, holding his head up to be scratched. The circle would go over the big head all right, and nice and snug, too. It would be a little thing to slip it on.

The sheriff belched and stirred and filled his glass, spilling a little down his chin when he drank. His eyes held Jim. "Don't recollect seein' you around before."

"First time."

"I recollect," the sheriff said. "You're buyin' mules." He slumped back. There was the key and here the dog, and the sheriff's eyes half-closed and maybe unseeing.

Jim's hand was easing out when he heard running footsteps outside. The door of the tavern burst open. "Sheriff!" The man who had entered looked around, spotted the sheriff, and strode over to him. "Matt Elliott's comin' in. He searched out his cow. The one that was stole."

The sheriff's eyes lifted and came to focus. The men at the bar had turned, looking and listening.

The man blurted, "He's got the feller what stole her, too. In his wagon, with his tail full of lead. I ran ahead, soon's I learned."

The sheriff got up, pulled himself together, and made for the door. The men at the bar trooped out after him. Shorty was at the door, looking out. Jim's eyes ran around the room. There wasn't anybody, except Curly Locks, and there

was the key, lying on the table. His hand went out and took it in and tucked it in his pocket. He got up, feeling his head thumping in his throat. "Reckon I'll put my horse up," he said as he edged past the tavern keeper.

This must be the jail all right. With the key Jim poked for the keyhole. The lock screeched as he turned. He loosened the hasp from the staple and gave the door a little push and whispered, "Boone! Boone!" It was a time before he got an answer. "It's me, Jim Deakins."

He heard a voice then, just a blurt of sound like a man surprised, and heard Boone's feet, moving slow and uneven. "Jim!"

"Don't ask no questions. Git on the horse. Quick! We'll ride double."

Even in the dark Jim could see that Boone moved like an old man, an old man just getting out of a chair and waiting for his joints to ease. "Hurry up, Boone!"

Jim wouldn't have known Boone's voice. "Goddam 'em Goddam 'em! I'll kill 'em." Boone wasn't even fixing to get on the horse.

"You'll get kilt. Come on, Boone! They'll be on to us in a shake."

"He whopped me! He whopped me till I was near dead." Boone's voice broke. "I'll kill him, I tell you." He jerked his arm loose from Jim's grasp and faced toward the town. "Stoled my gun, too!"

"You want to go to St. Louis, don't you, Boone? That's what counts. Not this here. You want to trap beaver and fight Injuns and live like a natural man."

"Not yit, I don't."

"Shhh! You want to get 'em down on us! Come on, now. We got to hurry. Bedwell's horse's at the rack, and the sheriff's, too. Won't take 'em long to ketch us if we don't get goin'."

"You see my gun?"

seemed like a year, the little shadow moved away from the rack and a big one followed it. They came straight across to Jim, seeming to make loud noises as they moved, seeming to make an easy sight of themselves.

"There, by God!" Boone said, and got his foot up and pulled himself into the saddle.

"Best walk soft for a ways," Jim said under his breath. The sounds down the road were so close now he expected any time to hear a voice cry out, telling that a horse had been stolen. "Easy, Boone, I tell you."

The voices faded as they walked the horses along. After a while they were no more than far echoes. Dim ahead of them, like a swath through the trees, the road opened, leading to Vincennes, leading to St. Louis.

"Now we can git," Jim said, and kicked his horse into a run. Already Boone was galloping ahead.

Part Two



1830

Chapter IX

THE camp was silent, except now and then for the mutter of one man to another and the clink of spoons against metal plates. The fire around which they were circled glowed and died and glowed again as the breeze played with it. Against the river the keelboat *Mandan* was a black shape, raising a slim finger into the sky.

Boone sopped up the bean juice with a piece of corn bread and swallowed the last of his bitter coffee. The food tasted better than city fare, for all that it was plain. The three weeks he had passed in St. Louis waiting for a chance to go west would do him for a time. It didn't suit him to be where people were so thick, though he had got himself a good-enough job working in a livery stable, where he fed and brushed down horses and cleaned carriages and tidied up the stalls. Jim, having more learning and more liking for folks, had found work in a store, where he got to parcel out beans and meal and copperas.

Summers, the hunter, got up and looked at the men about the fire. His eye fixed on the patron. As if to break a spell he said, "I be dogged, Jourdonnais, keep feedin' us them bastardy white beans and I do believe we'll blow your boat

to the Roche Jaune." The men looked at him unsmiling, their eyes catching glints from the fire.

"It is the gran' idea," Jourdonnais answered. He brought his feet up in a cross-legged squat and spread his hands. "If only the res' could make the wind like you."

The cook arose and stirred the pot that hung over the fire. The rushes that the men had tramped down to make a camping place squeaked under his step. "We maybe need that wind," he said while he screwed his face against the heat. "Ten days from St. Louis, and already two men down."

"We will eat the meat," the patron continued, "when Monsieur Summers shoots it."

The hunter's lean face grinned at Boone. In the firelight his buckskins looked ghostly. "Jourdonnais would like a milk cow. He would now." To Jourdonnais he said, "You'll have meat aplenty when we hit meat country." He moved off toward the bank where the boat lay. Boone rolled over on his side and watched him, saw him walk up the plank angled against her side, and disappear in the bow.

Jim Deakins was lying on his belly. He reached out and put a hand on Boone's arm. "Which you rather do, tow or pole or row?"

"I'd rather set and let the wind work."

"If it just would." Jim brought his hand before his face and spread the fingers wide. "That towline like to wore me to the bone. I pret' near hope we have to pole tomorrow. Or get stuck."

"It don't seem to bother the French."

"God, no! And it don't gall a woodchuck to dig a hole or a hound to run. They don't know no better. They don't know nothin' but workin' a boat up this river."

Summers was a white shadow against the black of the cargo box. He came back without a sound and stood while the eyes of the men questioned him. Jourdonnais looked up. Summers' face made a little sidewise move as if the news was bad.

"It is the bellyache, no more," said Jourdonnais, and gave his gaze back to the fire. "Tomorrow, all right. Better, at the least."

The men around the fire looked at one another and at the hunter again. "Zephyr got down a dose of honey and whisky."

"Good. With the calomel he be all right."

The bosseman got up, moving with a sort of heavy care, as if he still held in his hands the pole he plied from the bow of the *Mandan*. To Boone, his chest looked as deep as a horse's. "Holy Jesus," he said, "how they die sometimes!"

With one hand the patron pushed his black mustaches up from his mouth, as if to clear the way for his words. His voice was sharp. "Must you see death always, Romaine? It is the bellyache, for women to worry of."

Romaine muttered, "Brain fever, black tongue, lung fever, bellyache, it is sickness."

Like a hand on him, Boone felt the silence. Against it there was only the busy lipping of the water and the whisper of the wind in the walnuts. A half-moon, clear and bold, mounted the eastern sky. A raw chill was in the air that crept through the clothes and drew up the skin.

The cook fed the fire, fixing food against tomorrow. It crackled and sent a flame at the black underbulge of the pot. The cook said, "In sickness whisky is good. Much whisky."

Jourdonnais didn't answer. Summers lighted his pipe with a brand. His voice was light and joking. "You'll get plenty of whisky, all the Injuns can't drink."

"If there are any to swallow it."

"*Très bien*," conceded Jourdonnais. "Morning and night, whisky for all, until the bellyache is gone."

The hunter sat down at Boone's side. He and Deakins and Boone made a little group by themselves. "How long since you seed Uncle Zeb?" Boone asked.

"Well, now, it's a spell. Five or six year, I'm thinking.

Me and him been on many a spree, like I told you. Could be we'll run into him. That hoss is somewhere's around, if he ain't gone under."

Boone studied the hunter's face. It was a face that a body took to, a lined, lean, humorous face with a long chin. Boone felt good, deep down in him, that Summers acted so friendly to Jim and him. Like as not, that was because of Uncle Zeb.

Summers was looking around at the men. "When the French don't sing they ain't right."

"Sure enough?"

"They're skeered of the boat now, and the sick. Time we get up river where the Injuns are bad they'll be waitin' to sleep on board, I'm thinking, and to anchor out from shore to boot."

Boone hitched himself closer. "It's fair country up there, I reckon."

Summers looked at him, and his mouth made a small smile. "Wild. Wild and purty, like a virgin woman. Whatever a man does he feels like he's the first one done it." He halted and was silent for a long time, his gaze on the fire.

Boone wondered whether he was thinking of the upcountry or of a woman. It wouldn't be a woman like the one he had bedded with on the night before they put out, a smelly woman in a crib who demanded a dollar first and answered to it like a man setting out to do a job of work.

He could feel her squirm under him. Her breath blew against his ear. "Not so damn rough, honey. Christ, you kids are just like mountaineers the first night back!" It was a tired and whiny voice, and his ears told him, better than his eyes could, that she was old. Her perfume made a sick fog around him. Beneath it he smelled the animal of her. He rolled from the bunk when he had done and put on his boots. Her voice followed him into the street. "Don't forget me, honey." Forget? He'd remember a sight too well to come back. Jim had stood outside, licking his mouth like a dog

after a feed. "God, you're poky!" he said. "Yours good, too?"

The hunter's voice picked up the thread of his thought. "I seen most of it. Colter's Hell and the Seeds-kee-dee and the Tetons standin' higher'n clouds, and north and south from Nez Perce to Comanche, but God Almighty, there's nothin' richer'n the upper Missouri. Or purtier. I seen the Great Falls and traveled Maria's River, dodgin' the Blackfeet, makin' cold camps and sometimes thinkin' my time was up, and all the time livin' wonderful, loose and free's any animal. That's some, that is."

"Lord God!"

"A man gets a taste for it."

The hunter filled his pipe. His eye went around the camp site. Most of the men were down, but not yet asleep. An uneasy murmur came from them. "Git the French away from water and they ain't worth a damn, but they stick with a boat."

Jourdonnais came over to them and sat down sighing as if he had a weight of trouble on him. "Sore enough," he said softly. "Sickness, and so soon."

"No cause to worry about these two," answered Sumner between puffs on his pipe. "They'll stick for a while."

Jourdonnais looked at Jimi and then at Sumner.

"We aim to go where the boat goes," Jim said. "They are you're payin' us."

"And you, Caudill?"

"I come a right smart piece already. I ain't much' better."

"You are signed," said Jourdonnais, as if to dismiss the matter. "The deserter 'ave hard time."

He got out a cigar and lit it from Sumner's pipe. Then he drew on it the small red glow spread to his face. "That's a long night."

The hunter knocked the heel from his pipe. "How's the maine?"

"Ah! All right. He complain, but he stick. He is with me a long time, and always faithful."

"That makes three of us, for watches."

"*Oui*. We watch."

"B'God, we better, if we want a crew. It'll be better, away from the settlements. That is, if we git by Leavenworth."

"Pouff! They find no whisky on the *Mandan*, except what is permit' the crew."

"We got to be slick."

"A good wind, and night. Pouff!"

"Take away the whisky and we won't have but a smidgen of goods to trade with."

The patron stroked his black mustache. Under it his mouth eased into a grin. "Six cats, too."

"How much you figger for them?"

Jourdonnais shrugged. "One plew, two each. Maybe more if the mice are enough."

They talked quietly, like men spending time speaking of little things while a bigger one was in their thoughts. They reminded Boone of people around a body waiting for the preacher to get started.

"And you'd still have the Injun girl," Jim broke in. It was like him to speak up, trying to prize out information. In his mind's eye Boone saw the Indian child, a little splinter of a girl who was all eyes in a thin face. His gaze went to the stern of the *Mandan*, where Jourdonnais had rigged a buffalo-robe shelter for her against the cargo box. He heard again what Jourdonnais had said the first night out. "You men, you leave the Indian *enfant* alone. No talk. No play. No hands on her. Summers will shoot, by God, dead anyone who monkey. Leave alone! You understand?"

Answering Jim, Jourdonnais' voice was soft. "The little squaw. Ah! With an eye like the bluewing teal."

"We'll raise hell in the Blackfoot nation," said Summers. "Alcohol and guns and powder and ball."

"Good business. They want it."

"The other side of Leavenworth," the hunter went on. "all we have to bother ourselves with is the Company. And afterwards, if we slide by that new fort, Union, there's the Blackfeet and maybe the British."

"Business is danger. We lose, maybe. Maybe we make money."

"It ain't worth it, for the money."

"You go," said Jourdonnais. "You are my partner."

"Not for the money so much."

Jourdonnais' shoulders came up to his ears and fell back. "All hunters are crazy. You like the lonely fire, the danger, what you call the freedom and, sometime, the squaw. We like silver in the pocket, people, wine, song, women. We ascend the river only for the return."

"This child don't feel easy in his mind about them sick ones in the boat."

"We do what we can. Now it is up to God." Jourdonnais went back to his subject. "But you are not all mountain man, Summers. Half of you is grayback farmer."

"So?"

"Oh, not that you are not brave, my frien'. *Oui*, you are brave for a certainty. But you are not hard and rough and cruel, like some. You do not go off, like the hermit, to stay forever."

"Maybe so." Summers was silent for a minute. "You ascend the river only for the return. You ought to shine when the steamers run."

"Never!"

"They're on the Missouri a'ready."

"The *Duncan*? And to Leavenworth only!"

"They aim to try the whole distance."

Jourdonnais' dark head shook. "It is foolishness. Th Missouri never know where she run, here today, over ther tomorrow. Sandbanks, sawyers, towheads, *embarras*. Th steamer be smash' before she start."

"You'll see," promised Summers and sucked on his *pip*

The breeze died and the walnuts quit whispering. From the boat there came the sound of coughing and a long moan.

"If only we get there," said Jourdonnais.

"This child'll see about those poor bastards," the hunter said, rising.

The patron put out an arm to hold him back. His gaze was on the ruffled shimmer of the river. From it there came a shout.

"Ahoy!" shouted Jourdonnais. "Who is it?"

Boone turned to Summers. "It's a raft, ain't it?"

"Pirogue."

"Bercier, Carpenter and La Farge."

"Mandan, Jourdonnais." The patron had started for the bank. The others followed him. The pirogue was a black patch on the water. The paddles caught the moonlight as the men brought her in under the stern of the *Mandan*.

The steersman said, "We thought to be in St. Louis before now."

Jourdonnais caught the mooring rope. "The food is warm. Coffee we have. *Beaucoup*," he said, as if coffee was a rare thing on the Missouri.

The paddlers rested their oars. "The good God help me," said one, "but my ass aches!"

Boone's eye caught the barest movement on the *Mandan* and made out, by squinting, that it was a small head poking up, the head of the little squaw looking down on the pirogue.

Summers asked, "What's the cargo?"

"Bear oil. Lard for St. Louis."

"Bear oil, in March?"

"Cached it last season. It's sweet enough still."

"Climb ashore," Summers invited.

Stiffly the men started to rise. Half-risen, they stopped and listened. Their faces turned up to Jourdonnais. "Belly-ache," he explained. "Two got the bellyache." The men at the paddles looked at each other and aft at the steersman.

After a long silence the steersman said, "We are behind already."

"The moon she's up for long time," said one of the paddlers, and let himself sink back.

"*Merci beaucoup*," acknowledged the other. "We move along. The oil maybe spoil."

Jourdonnais tossed the painter back to them and with his foot started the pirogue into the current. The paddles glistened, the patch of black receded, until Boone could not tell what was boat and what was wave.

The patron's gaze was out on the water. "You watch camp," said Summers. "I'll see about the sick."

Boone and Deakins followed Summers to the fire, where he cut and lighted a spill. They went back to the keelboat with it, climbed the side and let themselves down in the bow. There was a smell there, a hot, sour smell that made Boone wrinkle his nose. The moaning had stopped. They heard, instead, a strangling, snoring breath. Summers handed the spill to Boone. "It's fever of some cut," he said.

Two men lay side by side on buffalo robes, half-covered by blankets. "Can't keep covers on 'em, but still I got an idee sweatin' is the ticket." One of the men had turned on his side and lay there without moving. The other was on his back. His eyes glistened in the light of the flame. "Water?" asked Summers. The man's hard breath caught at his cheeks, puffing and pulling them as he breathed in and out, changing his face from thin to fat. Boone heard the rattle of phlegm in his chest. He felt a movement on his leg and started from it. It was Painter, the black cat, rubbing against him. He put his free hand down and felt the cat's spine against it. The cat meowed once and began to purr, like a small imitation of the sick man. From the cargo box six pairs of green eyes looked out, the bodies behind them lost in the cage and the dark. Boone felt a little shiver along the back of his legs and up his spine, thinking they were want-

ing to get out to feed on man flesh. Painter arched ahead, purring.

Summers stood up. "François has gone under," he said, and stooped again and brought the blanket over the face. "Zephyr's nigh gone." He stood thoughtful and unafraid. "Come on. We'll tell Jourdonnais." First, though, he took the rag that had slipped from the sick man's forehead and wet it again in the river and smoothed it back. "All right. The poor bastards."

Jourdonnais met them at the bank.

"François's dead, and Zephyr won't last till sunup, I'm thinking."

The patron thrust up his hands. "Quiet!" he whispered. "Quiet! Not one will be left. It is time enough in the morning."

His warning given, the patron crossed himself.

Chapter X

FROM the cargo box Jourdonnais shouted, "*A bas les perches!*" The wind took the words from his mouth and blew them away. It flattened his clothes against his ribs and caught hold of the left bar of his mustache and swept it to the other side, so that he looked almost as if the hair grew only on the right.

Jim Deakins lowered his ash pole and felt it catch on the river bed. He brought the ball of it into the hollow of his shoulder and set his legs to driving, feeling the boat give under his feet. Ahead of him on the walkway that the Creoles called the *passé avant* the men were bent low with strain. One of them clawed ahead with his hand and caught a cleat and with arm and legs drove against his pole. "*Fort!*" Jourdonnais cried. "*Fort!*" The keelboat slid under Jim's feet.

"*Levez les perches!*" The boatmen straightened, swung about and hurried forward. "*A bas—*" They caught her before the current stopped her, and it was push again, step by step, while the ball ground into a man's shoulder and his lungs wheezed.

Damn the wind! It hit at Jim, throwing him off balance when he went forward, trapping the breath in his lungs as he angled against his pole. It was a cold bully of a wind, full of devilment and power, letting up for a moment and coming on again, stronger than ever, just to plague a man. At that, it was better to be on the wind side where, if a man faltered, he was pushed against the cargo box. On the other side, where Boone was, a body could go overboard as easy as not. He could see Boone when the crew straightened, just the head and the straight neck and the strong shoulders of him over the box, moving forward to get a fresh hold with his pole. Boone didn't look much to right or left. He kept his eyes ahead of him and tended to business, unsmiling and silent. Jim reckoned Boone wasn't himself yet, from having his gun stole and being jailed and whipped. Once Boone had showed him the marks of the whip, which still lay long and dark on his back like old scars.

"*A bas . . . levez . . . fort.*" The words were a chorus in Jim's head. He heard them at night and awoke to find his legs moving under his blanket. Or if it wasn't poling it was pulling, straining from the bank on a thousand-foot line that ran to the mast of the keelboat. It was like pulling in a fish, like pulling in a whale, except that a man never got her in until nightfall and had to scramble over the rocks and through the willows and in the mud from sunup to dark.

They had had just one easy day, when the wind was right, and Jourdonnais had the square sail put up, and the boat moved along so well that the rowers he had sent to the oars sang songs and only played at rowing.

That was the day Jim had tried to talk to Teal Eye, while Romaine was at the rudder and Jourdonnais up front in the

bow. Remembering that day, Jim tried to get a look at her when he came to the end of his push and straightened up, but all he could see was a little of the top of the shelter Jourdonnais had made out of a couple of sticks and a buffalo robe. She was sitting down probably, with Painter near her and the caged cats close by, out of the wind. Mostly she sat by her makeshift tepee, quiet as a rabbit. She might be asleep, except that her eyes were never still. They looked big and fluid in the thin, dark face—too big for her, too big for the small shoulders over which she kept drawn a tatter of blanket, too big for the legs that came from under the white man's calico and ended in a small pair of worn moccasins. For all that Jourdonnais had said, the men rolled their eyes at her when they got a chance and showed their teeth in smiles, but she just looked at them and looked away, her face as straight and set as some little carving of wood. If any had a notion to go further, Jim reckoned the thought of Jourdonnais and his promise and of Summers with his cool gray eye was enough to hold them back. At night a guard was posted, to see the men didn't desert, to watch the boat, and Jim imagined, to see no one tried to get with Teal Eye. She was mighty young and small, but still you couldn't tell what a man might try—a French boatman, anyway. Jim felt sorry for her, truly sorry, thinking of her as little and lonesomer than a man might believe. Later now, two or three years ahead, he might think of her as the boatmen did, but not now, not while she was so young and helpless and alone.

"Howdy," he had said on that day he tried to talk to her. He smiled. Her eyes flicked to his face and went on, as if they were seeing nothing and still had seen all. "Heap good day," he tried. He pointed toward the sun. "Heap good." The small face didn't change. He had a sudden notion that there was some old wisdom in her that found him not important enough to take notice of. Her eyes were liquid, as if dark water ran in them. Following her gaze, he saw Boone

Caudill standing on the *passe avant*, standing still, looking west beyond the river. A man might have thought the country was saying something to him. It occurred to Jim, studying Boone's sharp, dark profile, that Boone might have been an Indian himself. Two men in the stern started singing a song, looking at Jim and laughing and singing in French. He'd ought to had better sense than to speak to her with the damn Creoles around. For a bluff he got out his knife and tried the blade with his thumb and looked at them again, and they stopped laughing.

Summers could get Teal Eye to talk, though, and even Jourdonnais a little. One or the other always took her plate to her, and sometimes on shore Jim heard murmurs from the stern where they were. He reckoned they set a high value on her, the way they fed her and watched her and scared everybody else away. Labadie said she was a Blackfoot—a daughter of a chief—that a boat had picked up half dead the year before and carried to St. Louis.

It would be good, Jim thought, as one foot felt for a cleat and his aching shoulder fought the pole, to be Jourdonnais, up there on the cargo box managing the rudder, or to be Romaine, the bosseman, who stood in the bow with his pole to fend off snags and help steer. Sometimes, lying awake under the stars, he wondered whether François and Zephyr, back on the bank with dirt and rocks piled over them, didn't like it better, just resting and letting others do the work.

Against the wind Jourdonnais put the *Mandan* into shore beneath a cut-bank. Romaine went over the side with the painter and waded to the bank and tied her up.

"We rest," said the patron, "until dark and the moon." The sun was still up, slicing through the trees to the brown water that wrinkled to the wind. Here the wind only came by accident, in puffs that slid down the bluff or found a way around it. It made a noise, though—a hollow whining like hounds tied up.

The cook struck steel to flint. After a little a feather of

smoke arose, fell back, and arose again, shifting in the eddy of the wind. "Plenty food, Pambrun," Jourdonnais ordered, "and coffee again. The night will be long."

Jim sat down and rubbed his aching shoulder. Boone came over and let himself down beside him. Jim chewed on a stick. Out of the side of it he said, "My shoulder'll be wore to a nub, come morning. By littles the damn pole is pushing it clean away."

Three of the Frenchmen, sitting cross-legged, were singing. Jim guessed it was a dirty song. They made mouths over it and their eyes rolled. Two others wrestled on the bank, tumbling over and over and laughing as they tumbled.

"Mules," Jim said. "Just mules. Git 'em out of harness and they roll and heehaw." He looked at Boone. "You got a misery, Boone?"

Boone's gaze went to his face and then to the ground, and it was a little while before he answered. "Just a bellyaché, I reckon," he said, but Jim knew it wasn't. Boone got up and went toward the fire, walking stooped at the middle.

Jourdonnais was going from man to man, his forefinger hooked through the handle of a jug. He held it up for Jim. "A drink?" The liquor was like a flame in the mouth, like a fire in the windpipe, like a hot coal in the belly.

"Much obliged."

"Good," said Jourdonnais, of his alcohol and water. "Good whisky."

Pambrun beat a pan with a long-handled spoon. The songs broke off, the wrestling ceased, the men came to their feet and all pushed forward. It was beans again, and lyed corn, and pork strong with salt. In Kentucky people would be looking ahead to wild greens cooked with hog jowl and corn bread and maybe young onions and buttermilk cool from the spring. Jim heaped his plate and sat down against a tree, smiling to himself at Labadie, who was squatted at the

water's edge washing his face and hands. For God's sake, who cared about a dirty face?

Summers was talking out of a full mouth. A couple of little pieces of food fell out with his words. "I be dogged! I will, now. Just one deer so fur and a taste of turkey." He shook his head. "Settlers are doin' for 'em." Way early every morning, while darkness still lay on the river and woods, Summers slipped out of his bed and went ahead to hunt, meeting them later on the bank or hanging his game on a limb where they couldn't miss it and going ahead to hunt some more.

As the men finished their meal they took their plates over to Pambrun and went back and lay down, or sat leaning forward, and pulled deep at their pipes. Jourdonnais had piled a plate to the brim. He slid a spoon in at the side and started to the keelboat.

As the sun sank the wind died. It was just a whisper overhead now, a fretwork on the water, a breath on the fire, and after a while it was nothing at all. Leaning against his tree, Jim wondered what had happened to it. Was it still tearing on east of them, rolling the dead grass of last year, bending the trees and whining? Did it leave an emptiness where it came from? He let his back slide from the tree and put his elbow under his head.

It was dark when he woke up. He lay motionless and chilled, feeling the stiff ache of his shoulder, seeing the moon ride low and red in the east. Jourdonnais and Summers were seated near him, smoking.

"Pole or line?" asked Jourdonnais. "What you think?"

"You know the river."

"Non. Not the east bank."

"I reckon not. Everyone puts in at Leavenworth."

"Oui."

"Look open, from the west side?"

Jourdonnais shrugged. "Some trees, brush, sand. You know."

"We ought to warp 'er, maybe. It would be quieter."

Jourdonnais thought it over. "Good," he said, blowing out a mouth of smoke.

"We could go across, maybe under sail." Summers put his head up, feeling for the wind. "Little breeze is beginning to stir, and it's right. Then we pole her along, close as we dast, and tie up, and send the men up with the cordelle."

"Good!" said Jourdonnais again. His head moved. "The moon, she's right. They never see us in the shadow."

"They better not."

Jim caught the faint shine of Jourdonnais' teeth. "Good-bye the alcohol. Goodbye the permit."

"Goodbye us. It'll take Teal Eye and strong water and a heap of luck to set us right with the *Pieds Noir*."

Jourdonnais put his palm to the ground and lifted himself up. "It is time." He went from man to man, waking each quietly, as if already the need for silence was on them.

The breeze along the river was soft, hardly filling the sail. Jourdonnais sent the men to the oars. The boat went into the current gently. The water slid under her, shining dimly. The west shore pulled away, standing sharp in the moonlight. Over there a man could almost see to sight a rifle. The east bank climbed above them, climbed to the moon and beyond it, taking them into its shadow. Jourdonnais had the sail hauled down. "Quiet," he said. "Quiet now, all. No song, no curse. Quiet." He moved among them. "To the *passe avant*. *A bas les perches*." He was on the cargo box, with the rudder making his boat keep to the shore, his face thrust forward.

The boat swam ahead, noiseless except for the careful scuff of leather on the walkway. The crew acted without directions, putting shoulders to poles, feeling for the cleats with their feet, straining at knee and thigh until the first of them, arrived at the end of the *passe avant*, stood straight, and, seeing him, the others all swung about and trooped back and turned again and reset their poles, slipping them

into the water. The dark bank moved by them, its trees and undergrowth, its ledges and sand coming out of the darkness and showing themselves and falling into the darkness astern. The water murmured against the boat. Farther out, beyond the line of shadow, it was a wrinkled glimmer under the moon.

Ahead of them and high on the far shore the moon picked out a huddle of buildings. When he lifted his pole and turned and walked back toward the bow, Jim could make out doorways and windows like eye sockets and the dark strokes of sidewalls. From one window a light gleamed like a caught star.

Jourdonnais and Romaine were bringing her in again. Romaine was a shapeless movement in the dark as he went over the side. The men leaned against the cargo box, breathing deep. "The cordelle," said Jourdonnais, low-voiced, as he let himself down among them. "Come." He went forward. "Summers?"

The hunter's buckskins set him off from the rest. "Git the cordelle," he muttered, "and follow close after me." They strained at the heavy coil of line and lifted it to the gunwale. "Watch now." He gave a hand in getting it ashore.

Summers had cat eyes. He never stumbled, never seemed at a loss for a way, never lunged as branches caught him. The others struggled after him, drawing the heavy line along, cursing in whispers as switches slapped them. He kept them close to the bank, avoiding the trees that arose on their right. "Careful," he warned, turning. "We got to wade." His feet went into the water like an animal's, sure and quiet.

They were upstream from the huddled buildings, as far above as the boat was below. "All right." Summers took the end of the line and tied it around the heavy trunk of a tree, testing the knot after he had made it. "Back, now, and quiet." He led the way and stood aside when they came to the boat and then followed the others aboard.

"Take the line," said Jourdonnais. He carried the slack loop of it past the bow, along the walkway next to the shore. The men took it in until it went taut. "All right." Romaine untied her and came aboard and, straining mightily with his pole, worked her nose out from the bank. The men set themselves and began to pull, the line passing from one pair of hands to another.

This way was quieter. Only the smothered grunts of the crew sounded, and the whisper of the waves along the boat and the sound of the line working in the brush up the shore. Jim heaved on the line, relieved to have the pole's knob out of his shoulder. This, he thought, was like the whale swallowing the line, and keeping on swallowing it until it had brought itself to the bank.

Romaine grunted at his pole, forcing the boat out into the river, testing the depth after each push. Once they heard sand running along the keel, and the pullers halted at Jourdonnais' hiss, while Romaine felt for the bar. He waved them on and they pulled again and the boat moved, still working out of the shallows until the *Mandan* was on the very edge of the shadow of the hills.

The high cluster of buildings floated downstream, floated by slow inches until it stood over them. Jim felt a breeze along his cheek. It had veered around and was coming from the east. From the quiet huddle of the buildings a dog began to bark, furiously, as if set on waking folks to things their own senses didn't tell them. "Steady," said Jourdonnais. The dog must be running up and down along the bank, the way his barking sounded. Jim strained his eyes to see. A door opened in the building in which the light shone, and the light ran out in a yellow mist. Jourdonnais whispered "Wait!" and the men stopped heaving and the boat lay dead in the outer shadow of the bank. Jim made his breath come easy. He felt, rather than saw, the man standing outside the door, looking down across the river, standing there quiet

and watchful, prying at the night with his eyes while the dog tried to tell him what he knew.

Summers squatted in the bow. He cupped his two hands over his mouth. Jim's hackles raised as he heard the howl, starting low and rising—the wild, lonely cry of a wolf, challenging the dog and the night. It might have come from upstream or downstream, from near or far, from anywhere or everywhere. The dog went into a regular fit. His barking ran up and down the shore, carrying clear and sharp across the quiet water in the air that had gone still again. Then he heard a man's voice. The barking ended in a sudden, surprised yelp. A door slammed, putting out the yellow mist Jim breathed. Jourdonnais murmured "Pull!" The boat began to move again.

When they came to the end of the line Summer got out and untied it, and the crew went to the poles again, still working quietly. The patch of buildings on the other shore moved downstream and lost itself.

The moon was nearly overhead when they pulled the *Mandan* in on the eastern bank. "*Mon Dieu*, what a wolf!" chuckled Jourdonnais. "What a howl! Summers, you are crossed with the bitch wolf." His hands were busy with the lashings on the cargo box.

Summers went ashore and came back to report. "Night perfect. There's a good bunch of willows. Here, you."

The alcohol gurgled in its short flag kegs as Jourdonnais lifted it from the cargo box. He brought the kegs over the side, to the men who stood in the water and waded ashore with their loads to the willows where Summers waited. When they were done Jourdonnais brushed his hands together. Jim came back aboard with Summers. "Shipshape." Summers said. "You left some?"

Jourdonnais began lashing down the canvas. "O—i. Enough. What the permit allow."

"Enough," supplied Summers, "to keep the damn agent from gettin' suspicious?"

"*Oui*. A little more than what the permit allow, so the *Mandan* do not appear too pure, like the lily." He chuckled.

"It leaves a hole in the cargo."

"I fix it in the morning so no one would know."

Summers said, "You, Deakins, and you, Caudill, you stay with me. Get a rifle. We're the guard." He put some blankets under his arm. "Pambrun, give us a pot. We'll have empty paunches afore you get back, I'm thinking."

Jourdonnais had the canvas tied down. "We get back about sundown," he said. "Ready."

Jim went over the side of the *Mandan* after Summers and Boone. They stood on the shore, watching the keelboat swing around, seeing the shadows creep over it as it moved with the current.

Jim said, "What—?" and let his voice trail off.

"Jourdonnais'll drop downstream fur as a day's journey up. Tomorrow he'll put in at the fort, show his trader's permit and git his cargo inspected, aimin' to git here just afore dark. We'll load up, come night, and be all set to go next mornin'. Slick."

They moved off toward the willows. "How much whisky you allowed?" Boone asked.

"Gill a day for each boatman, but for four months only. The big outfits do a sight better. This nigger's knowed land brigades to git a gill a day for a whole year for each man, makin' out they was boatmen, and of course not a boatman in the lot, as everybody knowed." He walked on. "'Course, the crew does git some of it."

They dropped their blankets near the willows, and set down the pot and can Pambrun had given them. "Might as well sleep," Summers said. "It's a long pull to the Black-foot Nation. First, though, we'll make a little fire and dry out."

Chapter XI

THE *Mandan* was making time. The wind stayed at her stern, a gusty, notionable wind, but good enough to keep her moving. With all twenty oars working, the boat slid along. The voyageurs sang to the stroke, sang sounds that Boone had come to know by heart though he did not know their meaning.

*Dans mon chemin j'ai rencontré
Trois cavalières bien montées.*

Sometimes Jourdonnais, at the steersman's post on the cargo box, joined them, singing in a big, hoarse voice. Romaine stood in the bow, watching the river, his long pole held level in his hands. Now and then he turned and grinned, looking back towards Jourdonnais.

*L'on, ton, laridon danée
L'on, ton, laridon, dai.*

The sky was blue, bluer than in Kentucky, and patched here and there with slow white clouds. The sun looked down from it, bright as could be. Painter lay on deck in the sunshine, his green eyes half open, flexing his claws once in a while as if to keep in practice. The trees along the banks of the river were bright green with leaves still curled from the bud.

*Trois cavalières bien montées,
L'une à cheval, l'autre à pied.*

Boone pulled to the time, laying the long blade far back and pulling it through, trying for the easy skill of the Creoles. The Missouri wasn't made for a white man, not the way it was for the French. They were like ducks, or like beavers, sure and happy on the water and clumsy and half-scared off it. Jourdonnais wouldn't have taken him and Jim on, Boone reckoned, except he couldn't find a full crew of Creoles.

Jourdonnais was singing now, singing alone while the crew waited.

*Derrière chez nous, il y a un étang,
ye, ye ment.*

The voices of the oarsmen blended with his.

*Trois canards s'en vont baignans,
Tout le long de la rivière.*

Singing this way, rowing to the time, Boone almost forgot about himself, except when he pulled too hard and felt a quick little stab in his pants. When that happened, he remembered the smarting and the wet spot that touched his leg when he leaned back at the end of his stroke, and a cloud came into his mind. He wished he could take his jeans down and have a look, away from everybody. A man didn't have a chance to take stock of himself, working all day with the boat. And come night, he couldn't see. He had a pretty good notion what it was all right. He hadn't lived to be growing on eighteen without finding out a few things. It wasn't anything, or not anything much, and he wouldn't pay it any mind except that it worsened day by day and kept his thoughts down in his pants. Maybe he would ask Jim about it, or maybe Summers, just to ease himself. They were older; likely they could put a certain name to it and tell what to do. There were some things, though, that rightly were none of

for people's knowing, like the scars he carried from the p and finally let Jim see, he asked so much. It wasn't he ashamed of it. A sight of men must have miseries like it, maybe some of the crew; maybe that was what they said in French jokes about at night, making funny faces to go along with their talk. But he hated to seem like a green 'un; and, more, he hated people to be sizing him up and maybe laughing, knowing there was something wrong. Already summers looked at him sometimes, and Jim, too, and Jim asked questions when he walked stooped to favor himself as he had to when he first got up, now that it had grown so bad. The Creoles' song floated out on the water, out to the shore and maybe farther, out to where maybe buffalo heard it, or maybe deer, standing quiet and out of sight, wondering, or maybe to where an Indian heard it and hid himself by the bank and watched while the boat pulled by. They were getting close to real game country, Summers had said. So far, the hunter had shot three deer and some turkeys and one opening a whole passel of pigeons that they had all had to help Pambrun ready for the pot. "Deer run scierce from here on," Summers had said as they passed the Nadowa. The brush thins out, that's why. But we'll find elk up a piece and then buffler, a galore of fat cow, more'n you could ever count."

The sun was farther down than Boone had thought, half-way from overhead already and aiming around to the west. It slanted at him, warming his neck and the peak of his right shoulder, darkening hands already as dark as a nigger's.

Thunder rumbled up the river and rolled down on them, and some of the crew looked over their shoulders to the dark cloud that was rearing in the sky. While they looked the wind changed, veering round to the side and then clear around. The big sail snapped to it, and the keelboat sat back, giving to the violent gust. The Creoles looked up, their eyes uneasy, while their arms weakened at the oars.

"*Halez fort! Halez fort!*" Jourdonnais was shouting, and

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into larger growth—cottonwood and cedars, mostly, and here and there a small oak or ash. It was easier walking here than down river where the rushes that they called scrub grass grew so tall and thick a man could hardly pass. Through the trees he could see the greening hills that came down and leveled off for the river.

Boone looked around and then opened his jeans and let them drop. Goddam that woman at St. Louis! He saw her again, and felt her and smelt her, an old woman with a whiny voice who complained that he was rough. Rough! If he could get hold of her now she'd know what rough was. "How."

It was Summers, the hunter, walking quiet as a cat. Jim lagged along behind him. Their eyes looked at him and flicked away. He buttoned his pants. The hunter's gaze was looking into the woods and scanning the hills. He had his rifle in his hand.

"It beats all," he said, while Jim sat down on a fallen log, "game pulls back one year after another." He sat down beside Jim and motioned Boone to a seat. There was a silence, as if no one knew what to say, and then Summers looked around and looked straight at Boone while the beginning of a smile worked at the corners of his mouth. "It's about you've caughted, I'm thinking."

Boone smiled, his gaze still on Boone and the little smile still showing at his lips.

Summers glanced over, to see past Summers. "Nee'n to think of the only man ever caughted it, Boone."

Boone said, "on it's a man's own business what he's got."

Summers said, "Don't get on the peck, Boone. We'll leave it to your own business if you say so."

Boone the hunter looked at the ground and then up at the hills. Boone was old with things remembered. "Fifteen year, since I put out for Platte first. This child was no other than you be, and a greenhorn like you, too. We drank the same beer, did, the week afore we put out. I be dogged, I had

they steadied to his order, looking toward him out of wide eyes while they grunted at their work.

The bank was slipping ahead. Boone could mark it, sighting past the corner of the cargo box. Jourdonnais had the sail hauled down, but still they lost ground, inch by inch, as the wind strengthened.

Summers stepped over Painter and peered up river, studying the cloud. He turned around, toward Jourdonnais, and gestured toward the bank. The *Mandan* angled for the shore and the Frenchmen began to sing again, but softly, relieved that the boat had quit her heeling, happy to be through with work.

When they got to the bank, though, Jourdonnais ordered them out with the cordelle, and they looked at him, disappointed and reproachful, like a dog scolded home, and went over the side with the line while the wind tugged at their clothes.

The dark cloud hung like a blanket in the sky. A bolt forked down from it, and, after a little, thunder rattled in the valley. The trees bowed before the wind, thrashing branches knobbed with bud.

The crew went upstream with the line, and came to the end of it and pulled. It was like pulling a balky horse. The *Mandan* settled back and then lunged to their heave and settled back again. After while the towers came to a thick patch of woods growing down to the water, and Jourdonnais motioned them in, moving his arm with a jerk like a man disgusted.

Jourdonnais and Romaine were snugging her in when the crew got back, and Pambrun was readying a fire. A few drops of rain fell, blown to spray by the wind. A rainbow curved from the edge of the cloud, which was moving east as if it would miss them, but the wind kept racing down the valley.

Boone walked out from the water's edge, past Pambrun and his kettles, and pushed through the willows and came

or just dragged around, too tired to sing or even to rest, their voices no more than a mutter. "Time Jourdonnais gives 'em a drink and fills their stomach, they'll go again. We ain't done for the day."

"River's falling, or anyways not going up." Boone had just pulled the trigger on the cow and heard the punkiny sound of the ball as it went home.

"I was sayin' about my old man. When God got to him, he was mean to live with."

"Sure enough?"

"Oh, he'd git over it, until they was another meeting. But while God had him, He had him good. I was thinking, them days, that God rode a cloud and had lightning in both hands to throw at people just for being theirselves." Jim paused and went on, "Sometimes I do yit."

"I reckon my pap was too mean even for God." The cow had lunged once and fallen forward and was kicking in the grass.

"You can't beat God for bein' picky. No, sir. If He catches you playin' cards or sayin' one swear word, or with your hand on a woman, even a nigger, it's to hell with you forever and ever, amen. Even thinkin' is mighty dangerous. As a man thinketh, that's how he is, and to hell with him ag'in. Why you reckon He gave us a thinker, then? It's a sight better to be a dumb critter and enjoy yourself, not thinkin', than to think and burn for it."

"I reckon."

"God is some busybody. You'd think He had enough to do, just mindin' the world and the stars and such and keepin' an eye on the devil, so's not to be tricked. But no. He pokes his nose into every piddlin' thing. Even go to the backhouse, and there's God, lookin' spang through the roof or peekin' through the moonhole, bein' almighty curious about what you're doin'."

Summers said you skinned a buffalo belly side down, planting his feet out to hold him right.

The Big Sky

My old man, now, I reckon he thought some mighty low rights to git tied up with God that way, every so often, and tryin' about hell and hereafter. We had to pray and read Bible and repent the livin' day and some of the night, unless you could go to sleep and forgit God was watchin' you. I didn't know what repent was, but I done it. Yes, I done my share of repentin'. Mostly, now, I just figger that the hell, and let 'er rip. So far, ain't no lightnin' truck." Jim looked at the sky. "You can't tell, though." He slapped at the mosquitoes and reached out and pulled a stem of grass and stuck it between his teeth. The tassel at the end of it danced when he spoke. "Mostly, my old man was all right. When he went on his own hook, without lookin' yonder—" Jim's thumb waggled at the sky—"he was a right clever body. He was right about trouble."

"Why you keep talkin' about trouble?"
"Nothin', Boone. Nothin' much, anyways. Only we git to the Platte tomorrow or next day, Summers says."
"Uh-huh."

Jim's eyes slid over to Boone, as if they were studying him on the sly. "Let's leave 'em have their fun. Shavin' and such."

"I ain't aimin' to kick," Boone answered, and saw the slow grin that came over Jim's face.

"Good for you. You're a sudden man sometimes, Boone."
"I'm feelin' better, a sight better. Reckon it's the beaver, or what?" He let himself smile, looking into Jim's mild blue eyes. A short growth of red beard was sprouting from Jim's cheeks, glinting like wire.

"Might be. Or not drinkin', or maybe she's wore herself out, natural-like."

Jourdonnais left the fire and started around with his jug. Pambrun began warming the pot. "Take a beeg wan," Jourdonnais was saying.

When he came to him Boone shook his head. "I

drink for two, I reckon," Jim said and gulped deep. He wiped a splash of liquor from his chin.

Jourdonnais called back to them. "Over the line, green-horns, into the upper river. We shave the head on you two, *parce que* you keep the whiskers close. Maybe tomorrow, eh?" His teeth were like corn under the sweep of his mustache.

They ate—wild goose meat and eggs that Pambrun had gathered on an island and mush made rich with tallow—and went on afterwards, using oars and poles and part of the time the sail, which bellied and went limp and bellied again with the breeze. The river was wide and still high, but quieter now along an open shore and almost free of drift there. The boatmen's songs went out again, while the sun fell behind the hills and a paring of moon came up, pale as the sail against the light. Snipe tilted along the banks, some dove gray, like Bedwell's coat, and others showing red underneath. Nighthawks made a whimper in the sky, like a thrown chip, and from the hills that were a flowing ridge to the west Boone heard the cry of some animal, thin and quavering and lonesome. A little shudder shook him, traveling up his back and tingling the hair on his neck. This made living worth a man's time. This, and buffalo ahead, ready to be shot. He felt the beaver hair in his jeans and he had to smile to himself while he put his shoulder to the pole, thinking how worried he had been. It wasn't nothin'. A man got over it, like a cold. "*L'on, ton, laridon, dai.*" Would it be a bull or a cow him and Summers would see first?

They struck the Platte when the sun was high and a good breeze blowing. The *Mandan* kept to the far side of the Missouri, but Boone could mark the Platte coming in, around both sides of an island that was almost covered with water now. Only the center of it stood dry. The river washed the branches of the trees. The round green hills that were as an tree here and there, st

aged if a man got to the top of those hills he could look on and on forever, without anything to stop the eye, unless it was a herd of buffalo, or maybe a war party, all painted and feathered, raising the dust as they galloped.

The men who had been up river before had been busy all morning, busy whispering, busy going around, smiling at one another and looking at Boone and Jim and Labadie and Roi and the others who were crossing the Platte for the first time. And now that they were abreast of it Pambrun began yelling in his high, cracked voice and waving a razor, and Jourdonnais and Summers, Romaine and Fournier and Chouquette and Lassereau and the rest were grinning and rubbing their hands as if there was fun ahead. Jourdonnais turned the helm over to Menard and came down and sent little Teal Eye to the bow along with all the greenhorns. The wind pushed the boat along easy with only half the sail up. Teal Eye stood apart from the men, far up in the bow, looking at them out of her small, sober face and looking away. Boone met her gaze and let himself smile a little, while the men laughed and jabbered behind him and pushed one another around. Her eyes went away from his and came back for a long minute, but she didn't smile. Didn't she ever smile? Didn't she know what a smile was?

"Mister Deakins!" Summers stood on the *passe avant*. "Are you willing, or do we come and git you?"

"Onwillin', but comin'." Boone watched Jim walk alongside the cargo box, toward the arms that reached for him. There was a scramble, and Jim went down and out of sight. Boone could hear him yelling, letting out regular war whoops, while the others yelled, too, and laughed fit to kill, setting up a racket that scared a wild duck off the water. Boone studied Teal Eye again. Would she be purty, older, like she was now? Purty as a Ree woman? And willing? Willing if a man was a sure-enough buffalo hunter?

Summers yelled, "Mister Caudill." His face was screwed up, fierce, but underneath his eyebrows his eyes had a twin-

river leading on, flanked by the pale green of new leaves. Pelicans flapping over at twilight, a passel of them, flying wedge-shaped to the north. Wild geese along the shore in the cool mornings, with tiny goslings strung along behind, making quiet V's in the water. Whippoorwills calling. An eagle's nest high in an old tree, and Indian hunting wigwams, empty and falling down. And always the line or poles or oars and sometimes the sail, on and on, on a river without an end, on a river that flowed under them and led ahead, to Council Bluffs, to the Yellowstone, to the Blackfeet, to buffler, catching the sky at evening and winding on like a silver sheet.

"We put in at Cabanné's," Jourdonnais said at night, and Summers' eyes raised and asked a question, and Jourdonnais went on, "I know him for long time. He is all right. A friend."

"Works for the company, allasame."

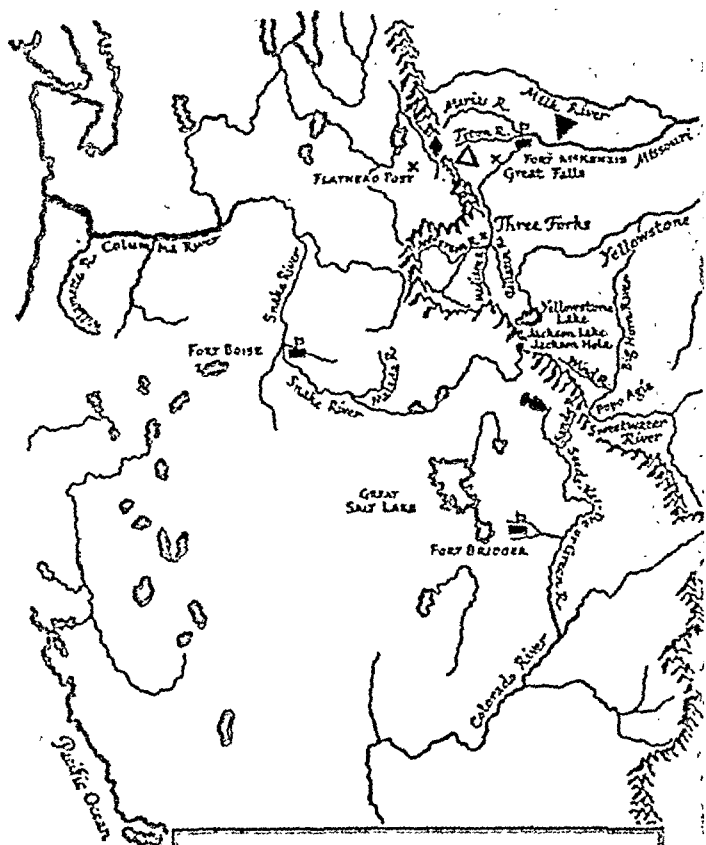
Jourdonnais nodded. "We stop for a minute only, to say hello. Also, to find out what goes on above. We maybe get some jerked meat, from the Mahas."

"Meat aplenty soon. Just a jump or two to buffler. Caudill, here, aims to shine at makin' meat, eh?"

Boone said, "I aim to try."

"Meat ahead," said Jourdonnais. "Also Sioux and Rees. Better to have a little meat on board."

They went ahead under sail at dawn. On the left bank the poplars stood naked, dead from fire, their limbs reaching out at the sky like the bones of a hand. Beyond them, past a creek, a chain of green and wooded hills rolled up. There were huts on the bank along the river, and bigger buildings above them on the bluff. A half-dozen Indians stood on the bank watching. The boatmen yelled at them and waved, and they lifted their hands and let them come down slow, as if they were tired or disappointed because the boat didn't come. A woman in a blue dress that hung around her like a sack
her broad face turning with them, until she



▼ Site of the Mandan Massacre	△ Upper Teton Valley
◆ Rendezvous of 1837	◆ Northern Pass over the Divide

river leading on, flanked by the pale green of new leaves. Pelicans flapping over at twilight, a passel of them, flying wedge-shaped to the north. Wild geese along the shore in the cool mornings, with tiny goslings strung along behind, making quiet V's in the water. Whippoorwills calling. An eagle's nest high in an old tree, and Indian hunting wigwams, empty and falling down. And always the line or poles or oars and sometimes the sail, on and on, on a river without an end, on a river that flowed under them and led ahead, to Council Bluffs, to the Yellowstone, to the Blackfeet, to buffer, catching the sky at evening and winding on like a silver sheet.

"We put in at Cabanné's," Jourdonnais said at night, and Summers' eyes raised and asked a question, and Jourdonnais went on, "I know him for long time. He is all right. A friend."

"Works for the company, allasame."

Jourdonnais nodded. "We stop for a minute only, to say hello. Also, to find out what goes on above. We maybe get some jerked meat, from the Mahas."

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Cabanné's post stood white against the green, stores and cabins and a two-story house with a balcony overlooking the river.

"Mahas, Otos, and maybe a few Ioways," said Summers, sizing up the crowd on shore while Depuy blew on a trumpet to give notice that the *Mandan* was coming in. A few rifle shots sounded as a welcome from the post, and four guns from the *Mandan* answered. Some of the Indians were dressed in buffalo skins, hairy side out, and some had blankets striped with paint. Children stood among them, pot-bellied and chill-looking without a stitch of clothes on them. The Indians moved aside a little as the *Mandan* came in, to let through a man who walked importantly and put out his hand as Jourdonnais jumped ashore. They stood talking as Frenchmen did, with their eyes and hands as much as their mouths. Boone reckoned the man must be Cabanné. The Indians had their faces painted, some of them with red stripes that ran down their cheeks and others with raw blotches of red, still showing wet from the spit, on their foreheads and chins.

Jourdonnais called back. "Do not leave the boat! *Non!* We go on quick. Let no one on, Summers."

A squaw with eyes as small as beans and hair hanging loose down her back pressed to the front, her hands out, putting one forefinger on top of the other and then the other on top of the first, making a sign. She pointed between her legs and looked up while she made the sign again, her little eyes asking a question. From the boat Romaine called "Hah!" and held up a coin, and then added another to it, but she shook her head, still making the sign with her fingers. The men were jeering at Romaine, looking at the squaw and then at Romaine and jeering, their eyes sharp and hungry. Romaine pocketed the coins and pointed down at himself and then held his two hands out, a foot apart, like a man giving the size of a fish. His eyebrows lifted in a question. The men shouted, making little of his brag, but the

squaw just looked at him, unsmiling, her fingers still fiddling. Underneath the old skin dress that was pulled in at the middle Boone could see the fat of her breasts jiggle. He turned his head toward the boat and saw Teal Eye gazing out, her face for once lively and off guard.

An old Indian, with one eye and a face so pitted a man would think hawks had pecked at it, came up to Boone and Jim, who had jumped from the boat and stood at the edge of the water. His empty socket was sunken and red-lidded and weeping a thick yellow drop that he tried to brush away with the knuckle of one hand. In the other he held a long black pipe, ringed with circles of lead. Grunting, he put his finger in the bowl to show that it was empty. His hand reached out to them, begging.

Jourdonnais and Cabanné came from inside the post followed by four Indians. Jourdonnais said something to Lassereau, who went up the bank and returned carrying a skin bag and went back and got another. It was jerked buffalo or pemmican, Boone imagined. "Tobacco," Jourdonnais said to Summers, who undid a lashing on the cargo box. The Indians all crowded around Jourdonnais as he took the dark twists. They talked in their throats, as if it were the throat that shaped the sound, and held out their hands. Jourdonnais paid the four and looked around at the empty hands and dropped a twist into the palm of the old man with one eye.

Cabanné shrugged when the deal was done. "Better the Mahas and the Otos than the Blackfeet. No?" he said to Jourdonnais. "You get the beaver, maybe. More likely they take your scalp."

Jourdonnais ran his fingers through his thick head of hair. "I do not need so much."

Cabanné's face was troubled. "Take care, my friend, of Indians, and other things, too."

For an instant Jourdonnais' eyes searched his. "Yes?"

Cabanné looked away, shrugging again, saying nothing, as if what he had said was enough, and maybe too much.

"*Allons!*" cried Jourdonnais and shook hands with Cabanné.

The banks sliding again and the river winding on, past an old fort at Council Bluffs, where Summers said three hundred soldiers died from scurvy once; through a stretch of river thick with snags, through country low for a while and then hilly again, bare of trees but green with grass; past Wood's Hills where a million swallows had nested in the yellow rock.

"Buffler country yit?"

"Quick now. Purty quick."

To Blackbird Hill, where a chief was buried; to Floyd's Bluff, the river slackening and the banks lying low and the Big Sioux coming in; to Vermilion creek, where Summers pointed out the silver berry bush that the Creoles called the *graisse de boeuf*; on toward the Riviere à Jacques and the Running Water, on by stroke and pull and push and sail, day on day, while the sun came up and circled the sky and hid behind the hills.

It was still dark when Summers prodded Boone. "Time to shine." Boone lay for an instant, blinking, seeing one star like a hole in the sky. "Buffler!" he said to himself and scrambled up.

Chapter XIV

BOONE picked his way among the sleeping men. Jourdonnais' face, faintly horned with the spikes of his mustache, was a dark circle against his darker robe. He was snoring the long deep snore of a man worn out.

"I got you a Hawken," Summers said from the keelboat,

face, wondering if he had eaten man meat, seeing an arm or leg browning and dripping over the fire.

"Injuns like dead meat. You'll see 'em, towin' drowned bufler to shore, bufler that would stink a man out of a skunk's nest. This nigger's et skunk, too. It ain't so bad, if he ain't squirted. The Canadians, now, they set a heap o store by it. It's painter meat to them."

The stars had gone out, and the sky was turning a dul white, like scraped horn. A low cloud was on fire to the east where the sun would come up. Boone could make out the trees, separate from each other now and standing against the dark hills—short, squatty trees, big at the base, which could hold against the wind. They walked slow, just dragging along, while Summers' eyes kept poking ahead and the light came on and Boone could follow the Missouri with his eye, on and on until it got lost in a far tumble of hills. The ground was spotted in front of them with disks of old buffalo manure under which the grass and weeds grew white, as in a root house. When he turned one over with his toe, little black beetles scurried out into the grass.

"Ain't any fresh," he said. His eyes searched the hills at the gullies that wormed up through them from the river bottom. "Reckon we won't find any?"

Summers didn't answer right away. He would look east up on the slope of the hills and west to the woods and river and beyond them to where other hills rose up, making a cradle for the Missouri, and sometimes his eyes would stop and fix on something, as if it might be game or Indians, and go on after a while and stop again. Boone tried to see what he was seeing, but there was only the river winding ahead and the slopes of the hills and the gullies cutting into them and here and there a low tree, flattened at the top, where birds were chirping.

Half the sun was showing, shining in the grass where the dew was beaded. There wasn't a cloud in all the sky, not even a piece of one now that the one to the east had burned

out, and the air was still and waiting-like, as if it were worn out and resting up for a blow.

"Sight easier to kill game along the river, where a man don't have to tote it," Summers said, following the valley with his eyes. "Let's point our stick up, anyway." He turned and started uphill.

From the top Boone could see forever and ever, nearly any way he looked. It was open country, bald and open, without an end. It spread away, flat now and then rolling, going on clear to the sky. A man wouldn't think the whole world was so much. It made the heart come up. It made a man little and still big, like a king looking out. It occurred to Boone that this was the way a bird must feel, free and loose, with the world to choose from. Nothing moved from sky line to sky line. Only down on the river he could see the keelboat showing between the trees, nosing up river like a slow fish. He marked how she poked ahead. He looked on to the tumble of hills that closed in on the river and wondered if she could ever get that far.

Summers had halted, his nose stuck out, like a hound feeling for a scent. "Air's movin' west, if it's movin' at all, I'm thinkin'. All right." He stepped out again, walking with a loose, swift ease.

The sun got up, hot and bright as steel. Off a distance the air began to shimmer in it. Summers kept along the crest of the hills, going slow when they came in sight of a gully or a swale.

It was in one of them that they saw the buffalo, standing quiet with its head down, as if its thoughts were away off. Summers' hand touched Boone's arm. "Old bull," he said, "but meat's meat." The bull lifted his great head and turned it toward them, looking, his beard hanging low.

"He seen us," Boone whispered. "He'll make off."

"Shoo!" said Summers, putting his hand on the lifted barrel of Boone's rifle. "They can't see for nothin', and hearin' don't mean a thing to 'em. It's all right, long as he don't get

wind of us." He started forward, walking slow. "You ki shoot him."

"Now?"

"Wait a spell."

The bull didn't move. He stood with his head turned ar down, as if for all his blindness he knew they were ther Boone's mind went back to his blind Aunt Minnie who cou always tell when someone was around. Her head wou pivot and her face would wait, while she looked out of ey that didn't see.

"Take your wipin' stick. Make a rest. Like this." Summers put the stick out at arm's length and had Boone hold with his left hand and let the rifle lie across his wrist. "L'im have it."

The rifle bucked against Boone's shoulder, cracking tl silence. The ball made a gut-shot sound, and a little puff dust came from the buffalo, as if he had been hit with a pe ble. For an instant he stood there looking dull and sad, as nothing had happened, and then he broke into a clumsy galop, heading out of the gully. Boone watched him, an heard another crack by his side and saw the bull break dow at the knees and fall ahead on his nose. He lay on his sid his legs waving, his breath making a snore in his nose.

Summers was reloading, grinning as he did so. "To high." Boone felt naked in the bright blue gaze of his eye as if what he felt in his mind was standing out for the hunte to see. Summers' face changed. "Don't think nothin' of i Nigh everybody shoots high, first time. Just a hand and a half above the brisket, that's the spot. It's a lesson for you. Best to load up again, afore anything."

Quicker than Boone could believe, Summers charged his gun. He hitched his pouch and powder horn around, drew the stopper from the horn with his teeth, put the mouth of it in his left hand, and with his right turned the horn up. He was ramming down his load before Boone got his powder measured out.

The buffalo's eyes were fading. They looked soft now, deep and soft with the light going out of them. His legs still waved a little. Summers put his knife in his throat. "We'll roll him over, and this child'll show you how to get at good feedin'." He planted the four legs out at the sides, so that the buffalo seemed to have been squashed down from above. The hunter's knife flashed in the sun. It made a cut cross-wise on the neck, and Summers grabbed the hair of the boss with his other hand and separated the skin from the shoulder. He laid the skin open to the tail and peeled it down the sides, spreading it out. "Can't take much," he said, chopping with his hatchet. "Tongue and liver and fleece fat and such. Or maybe one of us best go and git some help from the boat. Wisht we had a pack mule."

"There's a wolf."

Summers looked around at the grinning face that watched them from behind a little rise. "Buffle wolf. White wolf." He spoke in jerks while his knife worked. "I seen fifteen-twenty of 'em circled round sometimes."

"Don't you never shoot 'em?"

"Have to be nigh gone for meat. Ain't enough powder and ball on the Missouri to shoot 'em all."

Boone found a rock and pitched it at the wolf. The head disappeared behind the rise and came into sight again a jump or two away.

Summers kept looking up from his butchering, turning to study every direction, and then going back to the bull again. "See them cayutes?" Boone watched them slink up, their feet moving as if they ran a twisting line, their eyes yellow and hungry. They came closer than the wolf and sat down. Their tongues came out and dripped on the grass. "Watch!" Summers threw a handful of gut toward them. The bigger one darted in, seized the gut, and made off, but he hadn't got far before the wolf jumped on him and took it away. The other coyote came back and sat down again. "Happens every time," said Summers. He had the liver out, and the gall

most of them, though, the one who seemed to be the leader, had chopped it off short.

Summers' voice came to a halt. To Boone he said, "A man never knows about Sioux."

The Indians sat their milling horses. Their heads moved and their hands, as they talked to one another. The Indian with the short hair rode out. The tail of some animal hung from his moccasin. His voice was stronger than Summers' and came more from his chest.

"Asks if we're squaws, to run," Summers translated. "An what have we got for presents? His tongue is short but his arm is long, and he feels blood in his eye."

The Indian halted, waiting for Summers' reply. "I'm thinkin' they just met up with an enemy and got the worst of the tussle. That makes 'em mean as all hell. I'll tell 'em our tongues ain't so long either, but our guns is a heap longer than them crazy fuses." His voice went out again.

Suddenly, while the rest watched, the Indian with the short hair let out a yell and put his horse to a gallop, coming straight at them. He was low on his horse, just the top of his head showing and the legs at the sides.

Summers dropped to one knee again and leveled his gun and nothing seemed to move about him except the end of the barrel bearing on the rider. Boone was down, too, with his rifle up, seeing the outflung hoofs of the horse and the flaring nostrils. He would be on them in a shake. The horse bore out a little, and the cropped head moved, and the black of a barrel came over the horse's neck. Summers' rifle spoke, and in a wink the horse was running free, shying out in a circle and going back. The Indian lay on his belly. He didn't move. "That's one for the wolves," Summers said. His hand came over and gave Boone the empty rifle and took the loaded one and drew away with it. "Load up!"

The Indians had sat, watching the one and yelling for him. They hushed when he fell and then all began to yell again, the voices rising shrill and falling. They set their horses to

run streaking to one side and then the other, not coming directly at Boone and Summers, but working closer as the line went back and forth. Sometimes one, bolder than the rest, would charge out of the line and come nearer, waving his gun or bow while he shouted, and then go back to the line again. "Hold your sights on one," said Summers, "the one on the speckled pony. Hold fire till I tell you. Then slumb center with it." He had taken his pistols from his belt and had them out before him, ready to his hand.

The Indians made themselves small on the horses, swinging to the off side as they turned. "Shoo!" Summers said. "They can't ride for nothin'. Can't shine with Comanches, or even Crows."

"Why'n't they charge, all of 'em?"

Summers' eye ran along the barrel of his gun. "They got no stummick for that kind of doin's, save once in a while one likes to shine alone, like that nigger out there."

A rifle cracked, and in front of them the ground exploded in a little blast of dust. "Steady. Time to go ag'in." Out of the corner of his eye Boone saw smoke puff from the gun. A running horse stumbled and fell. The Indians shouted, higher and wilder. The fallen horse lay on its rider. Boone saw the rider, just the head and jerking hands of him beyond the horse, trying to pull his leg free. Summers handed over the empty rifle. Two Indians flew to the one who was down, slipped from the off sides of their horses, and, stooping behind the downed horse, rolled the withers up. The fallen rider tried to arise and went off crawling, dragging one leg.

The others, driven back a little by the shot, began to come in again, working to and fro. One of them bobbed up and swung his rifle over. The ball sang past Boone. He had the rifle primed again, and the Indian on the speckled pony on his sights. "Kin I shoot one?" He didn't wait. The sights seemed to steady of themselves and fixed just above the

and sleep in a sure-enough bed, with a white woman that smelled of perfume instead of grease and diamond-willow smoke. He didn't mind farming, too much. It was still getting outside. And he hadn't lost his taste for bread and salt and pies and such. They were a heap better than squaw meat, which men had been known to butcher and eat, probably after bedding with the squaws first.

Above him, out at the edge of the brush, a curlew was calling. Its sharp two-toned cry seemed to hang in the air. He caught a glimpse of it, with its wings outspread and just the tips of them fluttering as it glided. He waited for it to land, waited for the muted little trill that would tell him it was aground again and satisfied. The bird's shadow sped along the leaves over his head. It hadn't lighted. It wasn't going to light. The two-toned cry kept sounding, as if something had stumbled on the nest.

Summers waited and watched and after a while moved head again, going as softly as a man could. Except for the curlew and the magpies that were half a mile behind him now, the woods had no voice at all, and no movement. He came to a small open space and stood at the edge of it, unmoving except for his eyes. Through a screen of brush he could see a patch of the river shaded by the trees above him. The water seemed still as pond water, gathered in a small elbow in the bank. While he watched, a mallard hen came into the patch, swimming steadily downstream, watching for the string of ducklings that trailed behind her. They didn't make a sound.

Summers thought, "Injuns about, sure as God," but still he didn't move. A man couldn't run off yelling Injun without knowing where they were and who and how many. After a while he slipped ahead again, and stopped, and went on. A willow branch made a little whisking noise along his buckskin. He halted and put it back of him and waited again. The curlew was still circling, still crying about her nest.

The boats were stowed carefully in the brush, so as not to

the crotch. They rolled over, Summers underneath now, hugging the Indian to cramp his swing. He knew he ought to call out, to warn the crew oncoming with the cordelle. He felt the Indian's legs on either side of his knee and jerked the knee up. The force of it pounded the Indian ahead. The Indian let out a grunt that settled into a thin whine. Summers got his knife then, got it out and around and brought it down, feeling it hit and skid and go on. The Indian stopped from him and lay straining and got himself on his butt and sat, unable to do more. Summers was on his feet. He had his right hand back, with the knife in it.

The Sioux's fingers lay loose around the handle of his tomahawk. Summers thought his eyes were like a dog's, like a pitiful goddam dog's. He had to let him have it. The eyes followed Summers' arm up to the knife, waiting for it to come down. The far-off part of Summers' mind told him again he wasn't a real mountain man. Eyes like a goddam hound's. The knife went in easy this time.

Summers wrenched himself around and lurched through the brush to the shore. He could feel his shirt sticking to his back. The boatmen strung along the cordelle pulled up, their mouths dropping open, as he burst out almost on top of them. He made himself be deliberate. "Back!" he said. "Quick, but be careful!" He heard the Indians begin to shout behind him, from the clustered willow. Their arrows made a small fluttering noise, and their fusils boomed. He thought, "Injuns always use a heap too much powder," while he shouted at the Creoles, trying to put order in their flight. They had turned like sheep and started to run and fallen down and run again and fallen, as the fleeter overran the others. He was shouting, more to himself than to them, "Easy! You French sons of bitches." An arrow was sticking from Labadie's arm, but it didn't stop his running. It just made him yell. Christ, a man would think it had him in the heart!

The Indians shouted louder, but not from the willow any

more and not like men standing still. Summers could hear them breaking through the brush, their cries broken by the jolt of their feet. The Creoles were a frantic tangle down the bank. Closer, Caudill stood, his dark eye fixed along the rifle barrel, and behind him was Deakins, unarmed but waiting. "Hump it!" cried Summers, humping it himself. The *Mandan* lay like a dead duck at the edge of the stream, her sail down and useless as a broken wing. Free from the tow-line, she was settling back with the current and pulling out, drawing away from them. While Summers watched, he saw Romaine splash into the water and run up on the bank and take a snub on a tree, and then splash back to the *Mandan* as if the devil was on his tail.

"Go on!" shouted Summers. "Hump it, you goddam fools!"

Caudill's rifle went off almost in his face, and then they were running at his sides, Caudill and Deakins were, running and looking back. An arrow whizzed over their heads and buried its head in a tree before them. A rifle spoke again, sounding as if it had been fired right behind their heads. "Goddam it, run, you boys!" Summers felt his legs playing out on him. His head was dauncy, as if it wasn't fixed rightly to his neck. All of a sudden he realized he was old. It was as if all his life he had run among the sleeping dogs of the years and now at last they had wakened all at once and seized on him. He knew he couldn't make it. "Git on, you two," he panted. Back of him he could see the Indians, running in the open now and yelling their heads off, sure that they would get him.

And then the swivel spoke. The black smoke belched out of it, cored at first with fire, and hung in a black cloud, tattering at the edges as the air played with it. The shot silenced the yells of the Indians and the footsteps. When Summers looked back he couldn't see a Sioux, except for two that lay there for the wolves. After a while, above the slowed sound of his own moccasins, he heard them again,

but thin this time and lost in the brush. He called to Jourdonnais. "Let's move on up and get them scalps. They'll help a heap with the Rees and Blackfeet."

Chapter XVI

BOONE lay on his back and looked at a night sky shot with stars. They were sharp and bright as fresh-struck flames, like campfires that a traveler might sight on a far shore. Starlight was nearly as good as moonlight here on the upper river where blue days faded off into nights deeper than a man could believe. By day Boone could get himself on a hill and see forever, until the sky came down and shut off his eye. There was the sky above, blue as paint, and the brown earth rolling underneath, and himself between them with a free, wild feeling in his chest, as if they were the ceiling and floor of a home that was all his own.

Boone had his shirt close around his neck and a handkerchief half over his face to shut off the mosquitoes. They made a steady buzzing around his head, for all that he and Jim had built a smudge and bedded down close to it. He could hear Jim slapping his face and rubbing the itch afterwards.

"Worse'n chiggers," Jim said, "these damn gnats. Listen to 'em. It's their war whoop they're singing." Boone set his mind to listening. The whole night seemed filled with the small whining of their wings. "What's the good of a gnat, anyways?" Jim asked.

"They'll quiet down some, if it cools off."

"They don't serve no purpose, unless to remind a man he ain't such a somebody."

"I dunno," said Boone, knowing Jim was turning the ques-

tion in his mind as he did with everything. When it came to an idea Jim was like Boone with a rock or a buffalo chip, tipping it over to see what was underneath. Boone figured it was better to take what came and not trouble the mind with questions there was no answer to. Under a rock or a chip, now, a man could spot bugs and sometimes a snake.

"Maybe the pesky little bastards is asking themselves what God wanted to put hands on a man for," Jim said after a while. "Maybe they're thinkin' everything would be slick, except their dinner can slap 'em. Maybe," he went on after another pause, "maybe they got as much business here as we have. You reckon?"

"I wouldn't say as much."

"They're here, ain't they?" Jim's hand made a whack against his cheek. "And we're here, ready for 'em to feed on. I bet they figure we're made special just for them. I bet they're sayin' thank you, God, for everything, only why did You have to put hands on a man, or a tail on a cow?"

Boone could look down along the shadows of his cheeks and see the *Mandan's* mast, standing sharp and black.

"Or maybe they're sayin', like my old man would, we know it's a punishment for our bein' so sinful and no-account. Forgive us our trespasses, an' God's will be done."

The boat got to be part of a man, like his pants or his shoes. Only Boone didn't have shoes any more, but moccasins bought from the squaws. Everybody was dressed like an Injun now, or half like one, with long hair and moccasins and hunting shirts and some of them leather leggings. Even his hair and Jim's, shaved off away down on the Platte, was beginning to come around the ears. He could make tails, almost, from the tufts they had left. He had got himself a slick outfit, trading glass beads that Jourdonnais had put up against his pay and a turkey tail that Summers had given him. It was something, the store the upper Injuns set by turkey tails to make headpieces with. Summers said it was because you didn't see turkeys, leastwise not very often,

Ree camp. It wasn't dark yet, not so dark a man couldn't see, but the boatmen and the squaws didn't care. In the open grass behind the clay huts they made moving heaps, the men writhing over the squaws, rising and pushing and writhing and sometimes groaning like a stud horse as the stuff of them pumped out. Once in a while you heard a giggle from a squaw or a Frenchie, before they settled down to business. The dusk was thick and soft, like smoke you couldn't smell. Boone could hear the old squaws quarreling in their houses and the barking of the wolf-dogs that showed their teeth to white men, but they seemed far away, like echoes running across a stillness. Here there was just the single voice in a laugh or the throat in a groan and the grass rustling. By and by other boatmen would be coming along with their squaws. It was early yet.

Boone's squaw lifted her gown and sat down and lay back. There was no get-ready, no kissing or hugging or hunting with the hand. It wasn't that a man needed any, not with what was going on around him, and the heart big and urgent in the throat. The squaw lay waiting, thinking likely about the scarlet cloth her man had bargained for and taken only after he had gone back to her to ask if it was enough. She wasn't bad—straight and young and so light-colored a man might take her for white in the dusk. The smell of the smoke into his nostrils as he got down, the smell of horse manure and warmth and meat grease and woman and the smell of bruised grass.

"Sioux, mostly. The Sioux keep pressin' them. Likely they'll join up with the Pawnees. They're kin."

"They been uncommon friendly for folk you didn't trust."

"On account of the Sioux scalps, and on account of this nigger hisself. They remember me all right. Some calls me brother, from away back." Summers gave tobacco to two who came begging. "They're tricky, though, remember, and mean fighters. Meanest next to the Blackfeet, I do believe. Watch careful, or might be they'll take our hair."

"I'm bein' careful."

"I'm makin' talk with Two Elks. Want to come? Best to have a little 'baccy."

"I got a lookin' glass, too."

Buffalo robes were already spread around a small fire in the lodge they entered. An Indian put out his hand, saying nothing. They shook it and sat down while he filled a pipe. A squaw began to busy herself with a kettle, waddling to the fire like an old duck. Two Elks lighted his pipe and blew smoke to the sky and earth and the four directions. Holding the bowl, he passed the long stem to Summers and then to Boone. By the light of the fire the squaw had poked, Boone could see the white and welted line of the scar that ran along each of his arms and came together on his naked stomach. The vermilion on his cheeks was like streaks of old blood. His hair was heavy and longer than a man could believe. It came down from the sides of his head in plaits and lay in coils at his thighs like snakes.

In the pot that the squaw had fixed was a mixture of dried corn mixed with beans and cooked with buffalo marrow. It tasted good to Boone, putting him in mind of Ma and the garden in Kentucky.

Two Elks said, "How," and waited for a minute and went on carefully, like a man making a speech, talking deep in his throat. His eyes were small and deep-set. The little fire shone in them, behind the close banks of the lids. The squaw came to Summers and studied his buckskins piece by piece.

She took an awl and a piece of split sinew from a bag and went to work on a rip in his moccasin. Two Elks kept talking.

"The heart of Two Elks is full," Summers translated as the Indian paused. "His brothers, the Long Knives, have brought the scalps of the Sioux who are as many as the blades of grass, whose tongues are crooked and whose hearts are bad. While the pale brother makes war on the Sioux, the Rees will walk with him."

The fire made a ball of light in the darkness, a red bubble closing in Two Elks and his squaw and Summers and Boone. Outside there was only darkness, and sounds that came muted—the growl of a dog, a snatch of talk, the laugh of a squaw or the deeper laugh of a boatman out in the grass.

The chief spoke again, and Summers translated. "Two Elks is a poor man. He has given his goods to others, for it is below a brave man to want riches. He is very poor and needs what the white brother can give him. What he has, his brothers may have, too."

Summers reached for the powder horn at the Indian's side and held it to the fire to see how full it was. It took most of Summers' horn to fill it. Boone handed over a twist of tobacco and the looking glass he had brought along in case he needed it with a squaw. Then, because they looked so little, he took some balls from his pouch.

Summers talked with his hands and mouth. The Indian sat back listening, his eyes steady on the hunter's face, sometimes nodding and sometimes just looking through his narrowed lids. To Boone, Summers said, "I told him I heard the Rees had blacked their faces towards us, but I knew it was not true, that I had lived with the Rees and slept in their lodges and hunted with their hunters, and we were brothers. I said we brought the scalps of the Sioux and some presents, too, to show our hearts were good."

The squaw's hands picked at Boone, looking for a loose thread or a tear. Her fingers lingered on the boughten shirt

he wore, which was red-checked cotton and faded with the sun, and pretty soon began to tug at it while her eyes looked into his. After a while he took the shirt off and gave it to her. She made a pleased sound. Afterwards she barely brushed his head and jaw with her fingers as if to make out what he was. He sat still, trying not to notice her, as he reckoned a man was supposed to do.

The chief pointed to the robes they sat on, to show they were gifts. The squaw left the circle of firelight, clucking over the old shirt which she held in front of her. Boone heard again the sounds that came from the rutting back of the village. One voice rose high, a Frenchman's, speaking through a bubbling of laughter.

Two Elks heard and leaned forward, his elbows outspread on the knees that slanted up from his crossed legs. His eyes were direct and asking, and his old face in the firelight seemed as open as a child's. His voice came out in a question, which Summers seemed not to understand, for he said something short and Two Elks asked again.

Summers looked puzzled but nodded his head and spoke. Two Elks' gaze went down to the fire and thought made a cloud on his face. He was silent, as if trying to figure something out.

A dog was barking at the edge of the village. He set off the others until there was nothing but the sound of dogs out in the night. When they quieted the other sounds took up. By listening close Boone could hear voices in other lodges, where Jourdonnais and maybe Jim and Romaine were visiting. Above them he could still hear the sounds out in the grass behind, coming through the clay of the lodge.

"Two Elks don't understand," said Summers. "He wants to know, ain't there any squaws in the land of the Long Knives?"

As long as he lived, thought Boone as he squirmed for comfort on the ground, he would remember that question and Two Elks' open face asking it. "No squaws in the land

of the Long Knives?" In a way it was so simple it made a man want to laugh.

Jim snored lightly, fallen away from his thoughts. Jim always seemed to go to sleep quick, and to wake up feeling good, with a glint in his eye. The campfire was a dying glow in the night. Across it Boone could see other figures, lying loose and all spraddled out as if the touch of the ground rested them. Most of them made noises in their sleep, sucking in their breath and blowing it out. Only Romaine was up, taking the first watch. It would be Boone's turn next, and then Jim's. Jourdonnais and Summers always took the early-morning watches, figuring they were the dangerous ones. Romaine went over by a tree and stood there a minute and then let himself down, his back against the trunk. It was a mighty poor way to stand guard. After a while he began to tip over, a little at a time, like a bag not set quite right. Boone knew he was asleep.

Except for the men's breathing and the river forever talking to itself along the shores, there was hardly a sound tonight, bar the coyotes that sang at the sky. A man couldn't tell where a coyote was from his singing. His voice came from the hills somewhere, sharp-pitched and sorrowful, and threaded through the night like a needle. Closer, he heard the sound of a wing as a bird settled itself better for the night.

Boone lay on his side with his eyes half-open, looking down toward the *Mandan* and the water that caught the lights of the stars, looking and thinking and trying to drop into sleep. He saw himself shooting the white bear, and the bear turning as if to bite the ball out and falling and loosening away into death and Summers looking at him and smiling.

Sometimes bears sneaked into camps, looking for a piece of meat or a lick of sweetening. For a moment, through his widened eyes, Boone thought it was a bear he saw, waddling

slow and quiet toward the boat. His hand went over to waken Jim, but Jim had rolled out of reach. Romaine was lying as flat as anyone now and as sound asleep. Boone felt for his rifle. He sat up, holding the weapon in his hands. The figure lengthened from its crouch as he looked and framed its upper part in the star shine of the river, and he saw it was a man, working down easy toward the keelboat. Boone brought his gun up and ran his eye along it, and then he thought about Teal Eye in her little lodge in the stern and brought the weapon down. He rolled from his bed and started ahead on all fours, hearing his heart thump in his chest. It was an Indian—a Ree, maybe, or a Sioux, or a Blackfoot. There'd be others with him, though. He halted and hunted with his eyes, but saw no one except the man creeping to the boat. He was of a mind to let out a shout or to crawl to Summers and wake him up. For all he knew though, the man was just one of the Frenchies. That was it—a Frenchie sneaking up on Teal Eye, going against the orders that Jourdonnais had given out many's the time. God dam, a man would think they'd had enough for a spell! He'd learn him. He crawled faster, less careful now of making noise. The man inched along like sneaking on a goat and only one bullet to his name. Boone put his rifle aside, stood up and jumped.

His weight brought a whoof of air from the man. Boone got his forearm under the neck and up on the other shoulder and levered the man's chin up, straining the neck bone while he held him flat on his stomach with his weight. The man was hitting behind himself with his right hand. The knife in it ran hot along Boone's thigh. He grabbed for the hand, and they rolled over, making a crackle among the dead twigs. The camp came to life all at once as Summers let out a whoop. Boone heard shouts and moving feet, and the crack of a gun stock against bone. "That'll tame him." Boone had the wrist in his hand. The two hands, his and the man's made a wide circle. The man quit wrenching of a sudden.

done for now. In the morning she goes on again. We see about it then." He turned. "Come, Caudill, we mend the scratch, with balsam and beaver."

True to his word, Jourdonnais waited for dawn. Then, as the light came up in one big streamer he walked over to the two visitors. Summers had untied them, and they sat rubbing their wrists and ankles. Boone squirmed up, feeling the shallow cut on his leg pull with his movement, and went over and sat down by Jourdonnais. He saw Deakins open his blue eyes and flop over on his belly to watch. The men were stirring, getting up and stretching and chafing their beards with the heels of their hands. They lounged over within earshot. Pambrun was striking another fire, away from the dead ashes in front of the two men, nearer the shore. Already the mosquitoes were making little clouds round each man.

Jourdonnais said, "Now, by the good God, you tell us."

He had a pistol in his hand. Summers sat at his side, his rifle across his knees. Boone wondered if he had sat that way all night.

The bigger man spoke. "I told you, Frenchy. We was lookin' for a drink. We was tryin' to wet our dry." He had a head that bulged above the temples and came in and went out again, like the body of an ant. There was a bruise at the hairline where Summers had hit him. The little inquiring smile still curved the corners of his mouth.

"Tell the sons of bitches nothin'," said the smaller man out of the sharp face that seemed made for smelling. When Boone looked at him closer he was put in mind of a rattlesnake. The man had the same poisonous set of eye. When he talked it was like a snake striking.

"I've told 'em all."

"For a little," said Jourdonnais, wagging the pistol, "for a very little, I pull the trigger."

"No, you won't, Frenchie," the bigger man said. His gaze

went around. "It would get back to St. Louis, sure as hell's afire. They'd raise your license and maybe stretch your neck." He put his head to one side, as if the hangman's rope were pulling it. "You're too smart for that, Frenchy. Think you could close all these mouths? The boys don't love you that much, Frenchy."

The smaller man snapped, "*The Vide Poche* bastard! Let's up and go."

"Not until we're ready and damn good and ready." It was Summers, talking soft.

Jourdonnais said, "You come from the new fort, Union—yes?"

Boone could see the smiling man was thinking fast. "Yes, from there, but not for them."

"Zeb Calloway's there, Summers; he's a hunter for the fort." Summers' glance flicked to Boone.

"McKenzie, he send you, *n'est-ce-pas*?"

"No, we came on our own hook, I told you, nazpaw?"

"Who's McKenzie?" the little man asked.

"McKenzie," Summers said, "is the nigger that sent you here, to cut the boat loose or fire it, one, while we was asleep."

"You're an all-knowin' son of a bitch. Why'd you ask?"

Summers got up, took a step forward, seized the little man by his long hair and pulled him up. The man fought like a cat. Summers held him, waiting, and then hit him with his right fist, so hard a man would think it broke his neck. The little man thumped full length on his back and lay still, the teeth in his sharp snout showing like a dead squirrel's.

"Your friend didn't have no mother, I'm thinkin', to teach him else but cuss words."

The other man shrugged, appearing hardly to notice.

Summers said, "This child can give you some of the same, Long Face, if it'll make you shine."

Long Face still smiled. "When a nigger's froze for a drink he's like to do anything."

"Like cuttin' a boat loose or settin' it afire?"

"Like raisin' a keg, or even a jug."

Jourdonnais fanned at the mosquitoes. "We can make them tell," he half-whispered. "So many ways to make the talk come, if a man know how. Fire, or water, or rope, or maybe the live snake."

Jourdonnais and Summers waited, watching the man's face. The smile was still on it. The little man closed his mouth. By and by he moved and got himself up to a sitting position again. The side of his mouth was swollen, and a little trickle of blood worked down from it.

"Ain't no call for it, Jourdonnais," Summers said.

"What?"

"We know, by God. This is Company doin's. They air wantin' us to horn in." Suddenly Boone thought of Cabani down at the post at Council Bluffs and the trouble in his face and his careful words, "Take care, my friend, of Indians, and other things, too."

"You would let them go?" Jourdonnais asked.

"You're comin' close. Let 'em go, but without the horses they came on and without guns or knives or flint."

"Yes?" asked Jourdonnais, for Summers' tone showed he wasn't through.

"And with nary stitch of clothes. Rich doin's for the stirrups and such."

"Yes," said Jourdonnais with no question in his voice. "How far to Union?"

"Hundred miles and more."

"Far enough for *beaucoup* bellyful to the gnat."

Summers looked at the two men as he might have looked at dumb brutes. "They'll git ganted up some, too, carryin' empty paunches, and like as not have to dodge some Injun or git their h'ar raised."

"Good. Good. And nex' we make a call on Monsieur McKenzie."

Out of his broken mouth the little man spit, "You're some

are, now. Goin' to fight Union, like a rabbit after a car. We'll see your scalps, we will, hangin' in the wind." "If you get there, little snake," Jourdonnais said softly. The bigger man studied their faces, and there was only the wings of a smile on his face now. "We just aimed to raise drink," he said.

Chapter XVII

WHEN Boone thought back to that sneak-up on the camp he shook himself to set his senses right, remembering the heat that had come up in him when he thought one of the boatmen was stealing on Teal Eye. She was just a kitten, ten or twelve years at the outside, not truly old enough to interest a man that way. He pushed the thought of her away but still saw her, the face grave, the eyes big and noticing in a face too thin for an Indian, the front of her beginning to look like a woman sure enough when she didn't have her blanket folded across her. She put him in mind of some small, soft animal in a cage, watching, always watching, as if she had been taken out of a burrow or a woods into where everything was strange. She was more at home now than she had been, though, and moved around the deck and sometimes came on shore while Jourdonnais watched the men out of his stern black eye. Often Boone felt her eyes on him and turned and looked at her, and sometimes there was a shadow of a smile on a mouth that was as straight and neat as a good seam, but not thin like a seam. There was something to it that made a man wonder if she knew. He had seen Jim Deakins watching her many times, his eyes sharp and his mouth laughing and saying things, but she hardly seemed to notice.

Now that the *Mandan* had got to the upco-

were always on the banks, as if she thought to see a known face. One hour after another she looked to right and left, searching the bald hills, until a man almost expected to see her pappy, the chief, come galloping down the slopes with his feathers flying. Or, seeing the eyes watching and the face still and waiting, Boone figured maybe there was a hunger in her that the eyes filled, a hunger for the big bare hills and the streams running through the cottonwood and, far off and fair, the blue of a mountain like something a body might see through closed lids when he first laid himself down at night. Even when the smoke from the prairie fires was rolling and the eye couldn't see to the tops of the ridges, she still looked. Once, late at night when the moon lay bright on the river, Boone had awakened and made out her head above the side of the keelboat, pointed out where the far flames licked as if the edge of the world was on fire.

Summers gestured, saying, "Lookee!"

"What?"

"On the top of the hill there. On the rim rock."

A wild creature stood there, gazing down at them from under an arch of horn that seemed too much to carry.

"Rocky Mountain sheep," said Summers. "Bighorn. What the French call a *grosbecorne*. You'll see a heap of 'er farther up."

Boone and Summers stood on the *passee avant*. Jim was rowing with the crew, not rowing very hard because a fair wind was pushing them along.

"There's a galore of 'em beyond the Yellowstone," Summers went on. "What you ain't like to see, now, is a white bufler."

"White bufler?"

"It ain't a bufler, proper, nor a white antelope, neither, though you hear that name put to it and a sight of others. They keep to the high peaks, they do, the tiptop of the mountains, in the clouds and snow. This nigger seen one once—

and on, one hill leveling off and climbing to another, as far as the eye could reach.

Jourdonnais put to on the point of land between the rivers. He was singing a song under his breath, and when his glance caught Boone's he smiled, sending the points of his mustache up. "We make 'er, the Roche Jaune."

They stepped to shore and climbed to an easy plain that ran back for two miles or more. "Gin'ral Ashley had his fort on this here tongue between the rivers," said Summers. "Don't reckon there's aught of it left." Jourdonnais gave everyone a drink.

They ate buffalo tongue and marrowbone while a flock of crows quarreled in the woods, and after a while pushed on again, taking it easy, since Jourdonnais for once seemed to have lost his hurry. Boone wished he would hump it. Just ahead was Uncle Zeb, who had led him out here, even if unknowing—Uncle Zeb, who didn't like Pap and talked of Injun country like a man under a spell. He could see him in his mind's eye: the eyes looking out from under their heavy brows and the mouth working under the long nose and the face smiling now and then at him and Dan as they begged him to tell some more. It was a long time since he had seen Uncle Zeb. Still, a growed man didn't change much. He hoped Uncle Zeb would be glad to see him.

Against Fort Union the other posts that Boone had seen along the river seemed like hunters' wigwams. Big square pickets, evened off at the top and shining bright and new, marched around it, fencing in a piece of land a man could set a cornfield in. At the southwest and northwest corners blockhouses stood, broad as a barn, rising high to pointed four-way roofs. Low down on them Boone could see loopholes for cannon. A flagstaff rose from inside the pickets, its tip moving to a flag that rolled and snapped with the wind.

The fort was on the north side of the river, maybe fifty feet from the bank, on a prairie that looked to go back for a mile before it came to a ridge of hills. There were a dozen

than two or three Indians had leggings on; the rest were barelegged, and most of them barefooted, too. Red and white, they were laughing and talking, ready to give a hand as the *Mandan* pulled in. Some of the Indians waded out in the water.

Boone wondered if he ought to holler if he saw Uncle Zeb, or wait quiet and make himself known when the time came. Uncle Zeb was bound to be about; Long Face had said he worked for the fort. The Indians looked like Sioux though a good many of them had their hair cropped shorter so it just hit the shoulders. One buck had it fixed over his forehead and ears like a mane. His eyes looked through like a rabbit through a bush. He wore a little white leather cap. Their faces were red with vermilion and looked greasy in the bright sun, except for one that was painted as black as any nigger's. Uncle Zeb would know what the black was for. With their straggly hair and bare feet and such, they looked like a poor bunch. Boone saw two bear-claw necklaces but no beads or shells like the Indians down river decorated their heads with. A few of them had guns and every last one of them carried a bow. The guns had bright yellow nails driven into the stocks and small pieces of red cloth tied on the fixings that held the ramrods. Most of the men carried bird-wing fans and some of them had little decorated sticks in their hair. As Boone's eyes hunted among them, one buck pulled out the stick and began worrying at his pipe with it. The Frenchmen on the *Mandan* were eying the squaws, who stood back a little, smiling. They had on store-bought clothes, and Boone imagined they were the women that belonged to the white men at the fort. Uncle Zeb wasn't in the crowd; Boone had looked at every face.

The Indians who had waded out in the water were trying to climb aboard, and Jourdonnais was shouting, "Non! Non! Push off them! Push!"

As the *Mandan* eased in, a man came out of the gate and walked through the crowd, stepping like God. He wore a

dark suit, fresh-ironed, that must have cost a sight of money, and a shirt with ruffles down the front that gleamed white in the sun.

"So," he said, "the *Mandan* made it." He had a broad forehead and broad cheeks and a broad chin, Boone saw between spells of shoving Indians from the side, and the hair that showed under his city hat looked soft and black as a crow's wing.

"We aim to talk to you, McKenzie," Summers said, grunting, "if we can keep the Rocks off."

The broad-faced man turned about and shouted, "Pierre! Baptiste!" as if he was used to having people jump when he spoke. McKenzie's head jerked toward the *Mandan*. "Keep everybody off." The two dark-faced men who had come forward trotted up the river bank to a willow clump and came back with long switches in their hands.

Jourdonnais said, "Your two men, who 'ave welcome us on the Little Missouri, they be along. Maybe here now. So?" The men with the switches were laying about with them, driving the Indians back up the shore.

The cold eye of McKenzie rested on Jourdonnais without a flicker. "I don't know what you mean. Come on to the house."

"We thought you wouldn't be expectin' us," Summers put in.

Boone stood still in the stern, watching them and watching the robe that covered Teal Eye and sending his gaze among the people on shore on the chance that he might have missed Uncle Zeb after all.

Jourdonnais turned back. "No one leave the boat. We be a minute only, and then go on. You hear? Summers?"

McKenzie said, "Come on," and he and Summers and Jourdonnais walked to the gate and disappeared inside.

Jourdonnais' eyes were busy as they walked through the grounds to the back where the house of the *houngaris* stood.

was fine French brandy, so high in spirit that it seemed to porate in the mouth.

"Now, what was it?" McKenzie asked. There was a faint sped quality in his speech, such as Jourdonnais had noted in other Scotsmen.

Jourdonnais looked at Summers, wanting him to do the singing.

"You know," answered Summers, his gray eyes unyielding before McKenzie's stare. "We caught 'em, the freemen—twice, he was free once—that the Indians call Long Face, a hoss with a snoot like a weasel. I never seen him re."

McKenzie passed Spanish segars while his eyes studied Summers and his strong face kept as blank as a rock. He pulled their glasses.

"They'll show up, maybe, if the gnats don't bleed 'em to death, or the Injuns raise their h'ar. We turned 'em loose; they was borned."

McKenzie said, "I know them. Damned nuisances. Traded a pack and stayed around." He turned to Jourdonnais. "You understand, being a bourgeois, what a problem men are, that are, hanging around after their business is done. Nuisances, and a danger, too."

"Yes, monsieur."

Summers said, "Bein' on your payroll maybe had some-thing to do with their stayin' around."

"They weren't on the payroll."

"Like hell!"

McKenzie studied Summers for a long moment. When he spoke, though, it was just to ask them to have another drink. Jourdonnais felt the brandy strengthening him. Feeling and seeing Summers sitting there, hard and unimpressed and straightened, while there edged up in him the stubborn ambition that had brought him this far.

"They thought to cut the boat loose, or fire it," he said, looking himself look straight into McKenzie's face.

"For two to one, and a load back? What do you expect?" Jourdonnais spoke slowly. "Four or five to one, maybe ore, like the American Fur Company."

"We won't average two to one. Four or five to one on one scal, a total loss on another." He poured brandy into their glasses again.

"Still, we go on."

McKenzie drank and sat back while his lips savored the randy. His gaze went from Jourdonnais to Summers and back to Jourdonnais, but it was as if, instead of them, he looked at thoughts. Jourdonnais was reminded, somehow, of a hunter putting a fresh load in his gun.

"You won't be fighting the Blackfeet alone," he said, measuring his words. "The British at Edmonton House will see that they have plenty of guns, and powder and ball to match. They'll egg the Indians on and maybe offer a secret bounty for your scalps."

Jourdonnais said, "We go on."

McKenzie's calm gave way suddenly. "You goddam scalps!" The blood climbed his neck and flushed his broad face.

Summers got up—almost lazily, it seemed to Jourdonnais. "You're a little Jesus here, seems like, but not to us, by heaven! This nigger's got a notion to see if you'll bleed."

McKenzie looked at him, bold and calculating, while the anger died in his face, leaving it again as blank as a rock. "I'm sorry," he said, as if he really wasn't. "Sit down. No insult intended." Summers perched on his chair again, and McKenzie poured brandy.

"All-right," McKenzie went on after a pause. "You won't sell at any price. You don't want to talk reason. I have just one more thing to say. We can send a keelboat up, to fort up right next to you and offer more goods and you clear down the line." He was studying them. "Sometimes we do that, taking a loss just to discourage."

Summers said, "This here's Jim Deakins, crew of the *Man-dan*."

"Pleased to meetcha," Jim said.

Uncle Zeb got out tobacco and stuffed it in his cheek and let it soak. "Why're you here?"

"I fit with Pap."

"Measly son of a bitch. By God! If'n you're any part like him—?" He spit and sucked in his lower lip afterward to get the drop off.

"He's some now," Summers said. "He's true beaver. Caught the clap and fit Indians and killed a white b'ar a'ready."

Uncle Zeb looked at Summers. "Never could figger why my sister teamed up with that skunk, less'n she had to." He turned. "How old be ye?"

"Comin' eighteen."

Uncle Zeb thought for a while, then said, "You got no cause to be set up, account of your pap."

"Be goddammed to you! You take after Pap your own self."

"Sic 'im, Boone!" It was Jim, looking across at him with a gleam in his blue eye.

Uncle Zeb only grunted. He started the bottle around again, taking a swig of it first himself and ending the round with another. "This nigger's got a turrible dry."

Summers was smiling at the ground as if he was pleased. "Caudill and Deakins, here, aim to be mountain men."

"Huh! They better be borned ag'in."

"How so?"

"Ten year too late anyhow." Uncle Zeb's jaw worked on the tobacco. "She's gone. goddam it! Gone!"

"What's gone?" asked Summers.

Boone could see the whisky in Uncle Zeb's face. It was a face that had known a sight of whisky, likely, red as it was and swollen-looking.

"The whole shitaree. Gone, by God, and naught to care

savin' some of us who seen 'er new." He took the knife from his belt and started jabbing at the ground with it, as if it eased his feelings. He was silent for a while.

"This was man's country onc't. Every water full of beaver and a galore of buffler any ways a man looked, and no crampin' and crowdin'. Christ sake!"

To the east, where the hill and sky met, Boone saw a surge of movement and guessed that it was buffalo until it streamed down the slope, making for them, and came to be a horse herd.

Summers' gray eye slipped from Boone to Uncle Zeb. "She ain't sp'iled, Zeb," he said quietly. "Depends on who's lookin'."

"Not sp'iled! Forts all up and down the river, and folk everywhere a man might think to lay a trap. And greenhorns comin' up, a heap of 'em—greenhorns on every boat, horn-in' in and sp'ilin' the fun. Christ sake! Why'n't they stay to home? Why'n't they leave it to us as found it? By God, she's ours by rights." His mouth lifted for the bottle. "God, she was purty onc't. Purty and new, and not a man track, savin' Injuns', on the whole scoop of her."

The horses were coming in fast, running and kicking like colts with the coolness that had come on the land. The gopher was out of his hole again, moving in little flirts and looking up and piping. It was beginning to get dark. The fire in the west was about out; low in the east one star burned. Boone wished someone would quiet that calf.

Summers said, "Pears you swallowed a prickly pear, hoss."

"Huh!" Uncle Zeb reached in and fingered the cud from his mouth and put a fresh one in.

"Beaver's a fair price, a mighty fair price. It is, now."

"Price don't figger without a man's got the beaver," Uncle Zeb said while his mouth moved to set the chew right.

The horses trotted by, kicking up a dust, shying and snorting as they passed the seated men. Behind them came four

riders, dressed in the white blanket coats that the workmen at the fort wore.

"I mind the time beaver was everywhere," Uncle Zeb said. His voice had turned milder and had a faraway tone in it, as if the whisky had started to work deep and easy in him. Or was it that he was just old and couldn't hold to a feeling? "I do now. Everywhere. It was poor doin's, them days, not to trap a good pack every hunt. And now?" He fell silent as if there was nothing fitting a man could lay tongue to.

"Look," he said, straightening a little, "another five year and there'll be naught but coarse fur, and it goin' fast. You, Boone, and you, Deakins, stay here and you'll be out on the prairie, hide huntin', chasin' buffler and skinnin' 'em, and seein' the end come to that, too."

"Not five year," said Summers. "More like fifty."

"Ahh! The beaver's nigh gone now. Buffler's next. Won't be even a goddam poor bull fifty years ahead. You'll see plows comin' across the plains, and people settin' out to farm." He leaned forward, bringing his hands up. "They laugh at this nigger, but it's truth all the same. Can't be t'otherwise. The Company alone's sendin' twenty-five thousand beaver skins out in a year, and forty thousand or more hides. Besides, a heap of buffler's killed by hunters and never skinned, and a heap of skins is used by the Injuns, and a passel of 'em drownds every spring. Ahh!"

"There's beaver aplenty yit," replied Summers. "A man's got to go after them. He don't catch 'em inside a fort, or while makin' meat."

"Amen and go to hell, Dick! On'y, whisky's hard to come by off on a hunt. Gimme a pull on your bottle. I got a terrible dry."

Boone heard his own voice, sounding tight and toneless. "She still looks new to me, new and purty." In the growing darkness he could feel Uncle Zeb's eyes on him, looking

at him from under their thickets—tired old eyes that whisky had run red rivers in.

"We're pushin' on," said Summers, "beyant the ~~MEK~~ to Blackfoot country."

"This child heerd tell."

"Well, now?"

"This nigger don't know, Dick. It's risky—powerful risky, like you know. Like as not you'll go under."

"We got a heap of whisky, and powder and ball and ~~guns~~ and beads and vermilion and such."

"You seen Blackfeet drunk, Dick?"

"A few."

"They're mean. Oh, by God, they're mean! An' tricky and unreliable. But you know that as good as me. Got an ~~interpreter~~?"

"Just this hoss. I know it a little, and sign talk, of course. We ain't got beaver for a passel of interpreters."

"You dodged Blackfeet enough to learn a little, I'm thinkin'."

"Plenty plews there."

"They don't do a dead nigger no good. Pass the bottle."

"How are you and McKenzie?"

"The bourgeway bastard, with his fancy getup and his tablecloth and his nose in the air like a man stickin' his head in the clouds. I know the clerks can't set to his table without a coat on? And the chinchin' company, squeezin' hell out of a man and drinkin' in' him Christ knows what for belly rot! McKenzie ~~pass~~ this child, and this child kills his meat, but there's as much as she goes. I'm just tradin' meat for whisky."

"Zeb," Summers said, "this here's secret as the ~~guns~~. Wouldn't do for it to get out. It wouldn't now."

"My mouth don't run to them cayutes, drink or no drink." "We got a little squaw, daughter of a Blackfoot ~~girl~~ she says, that was stole by the Crows and made a ~~pass~~ A boat picked her up, nigh dead, and took her on to St. Louis last fall. We're takin' her back."

Chapter XIX

ALREADY autumn was coming to the upper Missouri, the short northern autumn that was here and gone like a bird flying. Flecked in the green of the cottonwood trees, telltale leaves hung yellow, giving limply to the breeze. The blood-red berries of the *graisse de boeuf* sparkled along the silver limbs. It was often chill in the morning, warming as the sun got up and lay on the land in a golden glow, and cooling again as it finished its shortened arch and fell in flames among the hills.

The men were lean and hard, and brown as the Blackfeet who populated Jourdonnais' mind. Day on day he drove them, routing them out before the sun was up, keeping them at the line until the hills darkened and the light lay pale along the water like something remembered from the day. It was nearly always the line now, the line which was the last resort and main reliance, for the wind was seldom good. The men went half-naked along the soft shores, sinking to the knee, to the crotch, sometimes to the belly. They floundered in the mud, or waded out into the water or jumped from point to point among the drift, falling sometimes and coming up wet and sputtering but going on. Where the river permitted they splashed into it and pushed the *Mandan* with their hands; when they had to, they climbed along the bluffs like the *grossecorne*.

They were a crew now, such a crew as not even the Company could boast, wise in the ways of the Missouri and the keelboat, strong and long-enduring and not so timid as before, though the rattlesnake frightened them, and the great bear. Always with them he had Summers or Caudill or Deakins to kill the snake and shoot the bear, and to watch for

Pieds Noirs. Not an Indian had they seen all the way from Union to the Milk and beyond—not an Assiniboine, a Blackfoot, not a man of any kind. It was as if the land were deserted, except for the elk and the deer and the buffalo and the bear. Everywhere one saw them, at every bend, on every island, on every bar—not the great herds of buffalo that made the earth tremble, but wanderers, three or four or a dozen, browsing on the bottom grass, drinking in the stream. The hunters killed enough meat for half a dozen men, taking only the choice parts, spiking them to a great pile of elk antlers that had been placed in the prow. At night and in the early morning the wolves howled over what was left. Along the wild meadows bones were clustered, one skeleton and then another, where Indians and maybe the bold mountain men had butchered in their turn. *Mon Dieu*, what a place for game! The Kentucky hunters could not be restrained. They awakened eager every morning, to shoot more bear, more buffalo, more elk and deer and bighorn, coming in later with the red meat slung all around them and maybe with the head and claws of a bear or the rough skin of a rattlesnake with the head smashed flat.

The *Mandan* went on, the river lessening and the land rising into shapes that no one could believe, like castles and ruins that old folk remembered from France, like forts and battlements, like shapes a man would see only when he had the fever or a craziness in the head. Yellow, red, and white along the shores, and flashings like the mirrored sun and, above and beyond, the prairie, the so-big plains rolling on, yellow and dry now so that even the single wolf left a slow trail of dust. A raw, vast, lonesome land, too big, too empty. It made the mind small and the heart tight and the belly drawn, lying wild and lost under such a reach of sky as put a man in fear of heaven. It was the little things that made one at home in the world, that made him happy and forgetful; neighbors to hail and supper on a table and a good woman to love; and the tavern and fire and small talk.

and walls and roofs to shut out the terrors of God, except for glimpse enough to keep the sinner Christian.

Often discouragement rode Jourdonnais, making his voice harsh and his way hard. It seemed to him then that not even the good God could help him. For success, all must turn right and in its time: the Indians must stay away until the fort was built; they must come when it was ready, and come with fine furs—beaver and otter and mink; he must do his business quickly and be gone, before ice closed the river. How could he know that the Blackfeet had furs? Maybe already they had been to Fort de Prairie and traded with the British. How long to build a fort? Two weeks? Three? More? How keep the Indians friendly? How keep them off the boat? How prevent them from overrunning the fort, if the fort really ever was built? How manage them drunk? How get word to them when all was ready? How make them hold back the shot or the arrow until they could hear about Teal Eye?

When his thoughts were dark he made himself think about Teal Eye, who was like a cricket now, happy and active, looking out, saying things as if to herself, with an expression on the little face of one coming home and seeing maybe the remembered gate, or the old fence, or the house in the trees after a long time away. The daughter of Heavy Otter coming to her father's lodge. The daughter being brought home by the white brother. Yes, if the nation wished, he, Jourdonnais, the white brother, would keep a post among them and send not one boat but two and maybe three every season, and perhaps build more posts so that the Blackfeet had not to travel far. Let them bring their beaver to him, *and he would bring them strouding and paints and sky-blue beads and powder and ball and alcohol and all that made a nation happy and great.*

Little Teal Eye, like a bird, like a fledgling hopping! It could be that this journey was not a single gamble for a few thousand dollars only, for one cargo of fine furs and

n the end, but the beginning of a big trading house, like American or Hudson's Bay, dealing in fine furs and in arse, in robes and buffalo tongues. Maybe he would wear ruffled shirt and a fine suit, and people would stand back sitting on his words. *Peut-être. Peut-être.*

The little squaw, with an eye like the bluewing teal! How the young Caudill had fought when Chouquette had tried to slip into the bushes after her! There was a flame in his eye and a look like thunder in his face, for all that he hardly spoke. Chouquette was a thick and powerful man, wise in fighting with fists and knees and thumbs and, need be, with the knife, but he was no match against the other's fury. Even his knife failed him, kicked away as he got it out and tried to arise. And at the end, before those flames in the eye and the storm in the face, he had cried out for mercy. It was good, Jourdonnais thought, to have another to protect Teal Eye, but it puzzled him still that one should have fought for her who seldom looked at her and then only with an unmoving face. He shrugged inwardly, telling himself the way of Americans was often strange.

For all the want of Indians, he and Summers were more careful than before. Two men stood each watch now, and at night the *Mandan* tied up on the south shore, away from the side the Blackfeet were thought to roam in. The swivel always was trained on the bank. The crew slept on board, lying crowded fore and aft except for a little space around Teal Eye's lodge, where he or Summers lay.

The men looked like corpses, with their blankets drawn over their faces as a protection against the mosquitoes that made a cloud about every man, day and night, unless the wind blew or the cold came. The mosquitoes flushed out of the willows in the daytime, out of the sedgy grass that the feet of the boatmen disturbed, in streams that ran like wisps of smoke and grew into wheeling circles around each head. Let a man stop to light his pipe or load his rifle and before he was done they covered his hands and face. They plagued

Indians rising and coming on. Their shouts pounded on his ears. Romaine was on his hands and knees with half the shaft of an arrow sticking from his back. He motioned Boone on with a weak and helpless gesture of the hand that left him face down in the grass.

Something told Boone to keep away from the boat. He ran, hearing the bangs of muskets and the feathered whisper of the arrows, and dived into the river, turning upstream after he hit the water so as to keep close in to the shore, swimming under water until his lungs were like a burst. He turned over and let his lips up for air and went under again, stroking with arms and legs while the trapped breath in his lungs went to nothing. Branches scratched his arms and chest and he let himself up easy, his head poking into the brush of a fallen tree. He saw bodies lying humpled on deck. The air was full of a wild shouting. The water cut off as he went under again. He heard the river murmuring by his ears. He came up and swam, came up and sank and swam. After

the cries of the Indians began to seem distant. He hid himself into the bank, into a thick cluster of reeds and willow, and sat there for a long time, watching through his screen. It was all over now, except for the yelling and the prancing and the sound of muskets shooting into dead men. When the Indians passed Jourdonnais' body or the big lump that had been Romaine, they pointed and fired, or fell on their knees and beat the heads with rocks. Boone reckoned it was scalps they waved around their heads. Squaws and naked children had flocked out of the woods like chicks at the call of a hen. They started beating at the bodies, too, aiming mostly at the crotch. A squaw with a knife went to work on Romaine, holding up her cut afterwards for everyone to see.

The *Mandan* had been brought to again. Boone couldn't see the bodies for the Indians on her. The men were all dead, though, dead and being shot up and cut to pieces with

the tomahawks he saw raised. High on the mast clung Painter, his dark coat fuzzed out. Some of the Indians had painted their faces coal black.

Boone fingered the hole by his neck that the ball had made. It had no feeling in it. The blood had seeped down and made a watery stain on his chest. He crawled away with a coldness on him, inside and out, thinking of people who beat a man's brains out or cut off his pizzle after he was dead. His heart made a slow, heavy thump in his chest. His wet buckskins chafed him. He wished he had his rifle.

The river made a slow turn to the left, leaving the Indians in sight whenever a man wanted to stick his head out of the shore bushes. They were still yelling, still shooting, still prancing around. He saw one of them carrying a keg. He was safe for a spell. They wouldn't leave there until they had drunk up the whisky. He looked across the river, thinking he might see Summers. Did Jim get away? He was down river, out of the charge. Jim seemed far off, like someone he had known a long time before. He couldn't put his face together in his mind. He could see the blue eyes and the red hair and the mouth smiling, but he couldn't fit one to the other and make Jim's face.

He kept going, traveling soft as he could. He didn't seem to feel the mosquitoes that found a man no matter what. The sun swung up and started down. The point of land that the curve looped shut off his view of the Indians, but he could hear them yet. After a while they were only a lost echo. Would it be Teal Eye that set the Indians on them? It didn't matter, he reckoned. The sun went behind the hills and the air was still as glass and the sky deep. When he stopped, the silence seemed to sing above the little whine of the mosquitoes and the sound of water. He pulled himself into some thick bushes and lay flat with his head on his arm, feeling empty and loose like a sack. A bird hopped on a limb and for a long time looked at him out of its round eye and then went on with its business as if he wasn't there.

south and back again. Jim dismounted, too, and then Boone, and from the back Poordevil came galloping up and threw himself from his horse, showing off, and fell in the snow. Summers handed him a piece of liver when he got up. Poordevil grinned and bit into it and cleaned the slot with his tongue and took another bite.

Summers said, "This nigger's had enough of sagebrush fires and cold camps. That there timber looks good."

"It's like someone forgot to put a tree between the Powder and the Popo Agie," Jim said. "I aim to put my feet to a sure-enough fire and cook meat over quaking ash and set and set and eat and eat. It wears a body down, pullin' stems to keep a blaze."

Over nothing, Poordevil said, "Oh, goddam!" and laughed.

"You can't tell from what that nigger says what's bitin' him." Summers' gray eye was studying the Indian.

"He just talks to hear hisself, like a boy shootin' a new rifle at nothin'."

"All the same," Boone said, "he's comical. I wouldn't care no more for a bear cub."

Poordevil saw they were talking about him and felt big for it. He hit himself on the chest. "Hi-yi! Love whisky, me."

"Git on your medicine dog, you crazy bastard," Summers said. "We're goin' to kill us a bull and build a fire." Before he mounted he added, "We'll poke along the Popo Agie and the Wind and maybe up the Horn, dependin'. We'll catch beaver enough with the plews we got from fall, I'm thinkin'."

Jim faced half around to the north. "Reckon we'd fare better up a ways?"

"With Bridger's men thicker'n wolves around a hurt cow!"

Boone said, "Rendezvous is comin' soon enough, Jim. You'll see all them as is on Clark's Fork."

Summers said to Boone, "Ol' Red Head is a sociable nigger."

The horses stood slack in the snow, their eyes sad and lifeless, their ribs showing through the long winter hair.

"I'll break the way for a spell," Boone said, and stooped and examined the knees of his horse. "Come to Tar Springs. I'll doctor ye, Blackie," he promised. Blackie was a good horse, for all that he was ganted up now. Let the Indians have their white and spotted buffalo ponies; he would take a solid dark.

The bull Boone killed was young and fat enough, fatter than a cow would be now with a calf pulling on her and the grass scant yet. A couple of wolves loped up out of nowhere at the sound of the shot, and from a sky that didn't have a bird in it three crows came flapping. They lighted a little piece off and stepped back and forth, all the while keeping their sharp eyes on the butchering. The wolves rumped down to wait, their tongues hanging out and dripping, their gaze following the tenderloin and tongue and liver and marrow-bone that Boone and Summers packed on the horses. The horses had come alive, now they were out of the snow, and kept cropping at the grass, eating it clear down into the dirt.

There was a good camping spot, with a small meadow almost shut in by the trees, near where the Wind and the Popo Agie joined to make the Horn. The four men pulled the saddles off and hobbled the horses with rawhide and turned them loose to graze. Summers took a long look around first, saying as he nearly always did, "It's a sight better to count ribs than tracks," and meaning it was better to keep a horse tied up and hungry than to turn him loose and let him get stolen by Indians.

Poordevil gathered wood, and Summers laid it and struck fire. In a little while all of them had sticks slanted over the blaze with chunks of liver on the ends. Jim had put a pot on the fire, too, into which he had cut pieces of bull meat.

Summers said, "Wisht we had some coffee," and Jim put

in, "I hanker for salt," but straight meat and river water were good enough. They kept up a man's strength and never made him sick, no matter how much he ate, and made his blood good, too. A mountain man never got a running sore or a toothache or shook with a fever—or almost never, anyway. After a while he lost his taste for salt and bread and greens and such.

It was warmer down in the valley and clear of snow except where the trees grew thick and kept the wind and sun away. The sun was shining now, far off, giving only a touch of warmth when it lay on the back of a man's hand. It was making downward for the Wind River mountains that reared up, white where the snow lay and blue on the bare rock. From the west the wind was puffing.

After he had a bellyful Boone stretched out with his feet to the fire and his head on the saddle and slept. When he awakened the sun was near to the mountains, fixing soon to sink from sight.

"Jim went downstream, him and Poordevil," Summers informed him. Summers was spreading skins over some saplings to make a lodge.

"I'll point up, soon's I get my outfit on." He peeled off his leggings and got into a pair that had been cut off at the knees and pieced out with a blanket. There was nothing gave a trapper misery like hide drying tight on the legs, unless it was moccasins that hadn't been smoked enough and pinched a man so, drying out, that he had to cripple out of his bed at night and dip them in the water again. Boone's own moccasins were made from an old lodge skin that was half smoke itself.

There were beaver left all right. Boone saw cuttings along the stream and after a little came to a dam and peeked over. The pond lay smooth at first, and then a wedge of ripple started close to the bank and the point of it came toward him and sharpened into a head and turned and went the other way and sank into the water without a sound, leavin

just the ripples running out and whispering along the banks.

Boone slipped along the shore, walking soft in the snow that lay old and coarse underneath the trees, keeping back from the ice that edged the pond where the water was shallow. When he found a likely place, he walked around it and went beyond and laid his traps down. He leaned his rifle against a bush, cut and sharpened a long, dry stick and cocked a trap, and then, carrying rifle and stick and trap, went to the spot he had chosen. He rested his rifle on the bank there, felt for footing on the fringe of ice, stepped on it once and then beyond it, into the water.

The water was cold—so cold it knotted the flesh, so cold it made a man wish for a larger stream where he could use a dugout and poke quietly along the banks, dry as could be. He lifted a foot out of the water, grunting a little with the cramp in it, and put it back and brought the other one up. After that, they didn't hurt him any more, feeling only dead and wooden in his moccasins. He felt the mud stiff and thick under his soles and saw bubbles rising around his ankles and smelled the sulphur smell they brought up.

He stooped and put the cocked trap in the water, so that the surface came a hand above the trigger, and led the chain out into deeper water until he came to the end of it. Then he slipped the stick through the ring in the chain and pushed the stick in the mud, putting all his weight to it. He tapped it next with his ax to make sure it was secure enough. Back at the bank he cut a willow twig and peeled it, and from his belt took the point of antelope horn he kept his medicine in. The medicine came to his nose, strong and gamy, as he took the stopper out. He dipped the twig in the medicine, restoppered his bottle and put it back, and stooped again and thrust the dry end of the twig into the mud between the jaws of the trap, so that the baited end stuck about four inches above the surface of the water. It wouldn't be long, he reckoned, until a beaver came to medicine. Backing up, he toed out the footprints his moccasins had left. With his hands he

splashed water on the bank so as to drown out his scent. I reached out and got his rifle then and waded along the edge of the pond. When he came opposite his traps he stepped ashore.

By the time Boone had set four traps it had grown too dark to place the other two. He went back to camp with them, to find Summers and Jim and Poordevil eating boiled bull off pieces of bark, as the Snake Indians did. He found a chunk of bark himself and spooned meat on it and took the knife from his belt and ate. The spoon and kettle and one can, and the knives they wore, were all they had for cooking and eating since the Crows had paid them a visit in the fall.

"Beaver about," Jim said, and Boone nodded and went on chewing.

Summers was looking out into the closing darkness. He got up after a while, stiffly, and took his rifle. "Travel weather. I'm thinkin' we'll see Injuns any time. Best to bring in the horses and peg 'em close."

Poordevil said, "Medicine dogs all gone."

"Don't git to it afore it happens," Boone answered. "You an medicine dogs'll be all gone."

"All gone. Goddam." He trailed along after Summers to bring the horses up.

Afterwards they all sat around the fire for a time, smoking and looking into it and not saying anything much. When his feet were dry Boone went into the lodge and laid himself down. He heard the others getting up and yawning and making a splatter on the ground before they came to bed and then he didn't hear them any more. For the wind was flowing along with his dreams, flowing in the north country rippling the grass, singing around lodges he had never seen till now.

The days were gone when a man could sleep as long as he wanted and get up lazy and eat some meat and lie down again, glad for warmth and a full stomach and even the

at put the beaver out of reach. It wasn't quite sunup when Boone awakened, hearing the sharp chirp of a winter bird at spring was giving a voice to.

The others were sleeping, except for Summers who was sitting up and shivering a little. Poordevil was snoring a kind of whistling snore, as if the gap in his teeth gave a special sound to it. Every time the bird cheeped, he would stop and then start in again, maybe getting the cheep mixed up in his dreams. Jim's head was covered by his blanket. You would think he was a dead one, back in the settlements, lying here quiet with the cover over him from toe to scalp lock.

There was still some fire left, and some meat in the pot. Shaking in his buckskins, Boone threw some grass on the coals and nosed sticks over them. The flame came up, making him feel warmer just from the sight of it. The sun bulged up from the eastern hills, catching the Wind River mountains first and turning the snowbanks whiter than any cloud. Not a thing moved as far as Boone could tell, and not a noise sounded, except for Poordevil's whistling snore and the fire busy among the sticks. Even the bird had fallen silent. The wind itself was still now, blown over east and gone, and a man listening heard only his ears straining.

Boone set the pot by the fire and went to the horses, standing dull and patient, hobbled and tied to their picket lines. Blackie nickered and nosed Boone's shoulder as Boone bent over the knot.

When the horses were watered he tied them up again. They would have time to graze later after the morning hunt was over.

"Fair morning," Summers said when he came back. "Good thaw, though, or a rain, and the streams'll be too high for huntin'." He was looking west, to the snowbanks that looked clean-washed on the mountains.

They set out after they had eaten, Jim and Poordevil downstream and Boone up, and Summers across to the Wind. The pond lay quiet as a sheet of ice. There was no sound

in it or in all the woods, except for the quiet gurgle of water finding a small way around the dam. A fish nosed the surface while Bobne watched, and the water ruffled and lay flat again. From the dam he could see that his stick was gone, the stick he had forced into the mud to hold the trap. Sometimes a man worked so quiet he didn't do right. Like as not the beaver lay drowned in deep water now, and he would have to wade out and maybe swim for the plew and the twelve-dollar trap that held it. Only it wasn't once in a coon's age a beaver pulled loose on him, he sank his sticks that deep. He walked to the setting place, searching with his eyes for the stick floating and the ring of the chain around it. After a while he made out the float, lying free along the edge of ice, with the ring gone from it. A man couldn't tell where the beaver was, without he drowned quick, close to where the trap grabbed him. Boone waded out and looked into the water, following it while it got deeper and darker until the bottom was lost to his eye.

He straightened and shifted his rifle to the other hand, and stepped back toward shore to ease the ache in his legs, and then he heard a small noise in a clump of willows behind him, a bare whisper in the limbs. He looked around and saw the end of the chain, not knowing it for what it was, at first. He stooped and seized it and pulled her from the bushes, a young she in the prime. She crouched down when he had yanked her into the clear, not trying to run, but just crouching, looking at him while her nose trembled and a little shivering went over her.

"Got ye," he said, and cast about with his hand and picked up a dead stick big enough to kill her with.

He saw now that she had been at work on her leg. A little bit more and she would have chewed herself free. There were just the tendons holding, and a ragged flap of skin. The broken bone stuck out of the jaws of the trap, white and clean as a peeled root. Around her mouth he could see blood.

She looked at him, still not moving, still only with that little shaking, out of eyes that were dark and fluid and fearful, out of big eyes that liquid seemed to run in, out of eyes like a wounded bird's. They made him a little uneasy, stirring something that lay just beyond the edge of his mind and wouldn't come out where he could see it.

She let out a soft whimper as he raised the stick, and then the stick fell, and the eye that had been looking at him bulged out crazily, not looking at anything, not something alive and liquid any more, not something that spoke, but only a bloody eyeball knocked from its socket. It was only a beaver's eye all the time.

He skinned her, and cut off the tail and knifed out and tied the castor glands so they wouldn't leak and rolled them in the plew and reset his trap and went on. He got two more beaver. The fourth set was untouched. It was a good-enough morning.

Walking back to camp, he thought about rendezvous—and after. Jim wanted to hunt the Bear of the Sick River and head on south for the winter, to Tacs, which people sometimes called Fernandez. A man couldn't tell what Summers would do, maybe not even Summers himself. Boone wondered whether Poordevil would want to go back to the Blackfeet. Thinking about the north country, of a sudden he knew what the beaver's eyes had put him in mind of.

Chapter XXII

TRAPPING or traveling, Jim Deakins watched the country for dust and the buffalo for movement, as any mountain man would. Winter and summer, the Blackfeet were pushing south from the Three Forks to war on the Crows, and going on, a many a long camp from home, to rub out white men.

as they trapped the streams and made over the passes. It wasn't Indian sign he wanted to see, though; Bridger's men ought to come out of the north any time now, pointed for rendezvous. Allen would be with them, maybe, and Lanter and Hornsbeck and others that he had had himself a time with before.

Hunting was all right, and wintering the way he and Boone and Summers had, but a man got lonesome finally and hankered for people and for frolics. It was good to tell stories sometimes and to hear stories told and to brag and to laugh over nothing and play horse while the whisky worked in you, and to have the good feeling in the back of your head all the time that when you were through talking and betting and drinking and wrestling there would be an Indian girl waiting for you; and, afterwards, you would lie quiet with her and hear the coyotes singing and the stream washing and see the stars down close and feel the warmth of her, and the lonesomeness would all be gone, as if the world itself had come to set a spell with you.

Take Boone, now. He never seemed to get lonesome or to want to see folks, except once in a while for a squaw that he was through with almost as quick as he got her. He was like an animal, like a young bull that traveled alone, satisfied just by earth and water and trees and the sky over him. It was as if he talked to the country for company, and the country talked to him, and as if that was enough. He found his fill of people quick; he took his fill of whisky quicker, drinking it down like an Indian and getting himself good and drunk while another man was just warming up. Then one morning before rendezvous was more than half over he would wake up and want to make off, to places where you wouldn't see a white man in a coon's age.

Summers was the same in a way, but different, too, for Summers seemed to live in his head a good part of the time, as if it was the years kept him company. He would sit at the campfire and smoke or go about the horses or tend to the

skins, and a man would know that he was away back in his mind, seeing old things, things that had happened long ago, before the *Mandan* ever put out from St. Louis, seeing himself as a boy maybe in Missouri or a young man down on the Platte. Summers liked company, all right, and liked drinking and frolics as well as anybody, but in a quiet way, as if nothing that happened now was as important as what had gone before. It was age getting him, likely; a man was lucky if he didn't grow too old and have to think that the best of what was going to happen to him had already happened. God was mighty mean in some ways, letting a body get on to the point where he always hungered to turn back, making him know he wasn't the man he had been, making his bed cold but keeping in his mind the time when it wasn't. It was like a man was pushed backwards down hill, seeing the top getting farther from him every day, but always seeing it, always wishing he could go back. Sometimes God seemed pretty small.

Summers was in one of his spells now, just sitting and smoking and thinking, and saying only a word or two, and then only if spoken to first. Boone had dug a hole where the fire was and put a deer's head in it and raked the coals over. In the kettle there was meat cut small, cooking with wild onions that Jim had pulled, remembering food back in Kentucky.

"We might as well be gettin' on, with the water so high," Jim said. "Be rendezvous time before it goes down."

Summers asked "Reckon?" as if he wasn't listening.

Boone and Poordevil sat away from them a little. As Jim watched, Boone put his finger on his eye and Poordevil sounded the Indian word for it. Boone tried the word then, practicing with it until Poordevil smiled and bobbed his head that he had got it right.

Jim bent over the moccasin he was making, pulling a whang through the holes his awl had bored. Boone had got

so's he spent a deal of time talking with Poordevil that way, learning the Blackfoot words for things.

The sun was coming down from overhead. They would eat and maybe sleep a little, and then it would be time to look at the traps again. Even with the water as high as it was, they caught a few beaver. It might be he would go out first and kill some meat. The cows were thin yet. Bull was better, or mountain sheep. There was a mess of mountain sheep on the shoulders of the Wind mountains—rams and ewes and lambs full of play. They leaped along slopes that would affright a bird, never falling, never hurting themselves.

Jim looked up from his work and let his eye go all around, and then he took to his feet and looked harder, at the buffalo running north of them.

Summers saw him and got up and looked, too, and reached over for the rifle he had leaned against a tree. He jerked his head as Boone lifted his glance. They stood watching, seeing the buffalo stream to the east, leaving a slow rising cloud behind them.

Without speaking, Summers moved off toward the horses and so started them all that way. The horses snorted as they trotted to them, and tried to shy off, rearing and plunging with the hobbles but making a poor out at getting away. Back at camp, the men threw saddles on them and led them into a patch of brush.

Summers squinted through the branches. The cloud that the buffalo had left was sinking, and at the tail end of it Jim could see horsemen coming through. "Can't tell," Summers said. "Injuns or hunters. They ain't like to sight our fire at this time of day without they ride close."

"Long Knives," Poordevil announced. "No Injuns."

"We'll see. Looks to be six or ten."

Except for Poordevil, who stood at the side of his horse without even his bow in his hand, they brought their saddle horses in front of them as the horsemen approached, looking

over the backs of them and on through the branches with their rifles rested across their saddles. Summers' eye slid to Poordevil. "Can't figger how that nigger's lived so long."

If it was Long Knives it would be Bridger's men, Jim thought—Bridger's men making for rendezvous on the Seeds-kee-dee which some folks were calling the Green River now.

Summers relaxed. "Injuns don't carry rifles that way, I'm thinkin'." He stepped from the brush.

The horses pulled up short, and the riders swung their rifles on him until he shouted at them and fired his own weapon in the air. Jim fired his gun then, and heard Boone's go off next to him, and then there was a quick scattering of shots and voices shouting and hoofbeats thudding on the ground as the horsemen swept up.

"Dogged if it ain't Allen and Shutts and Reeson. How, El-bridge? How, Robinson?"

The men slid from their horses and shook hands around, yelling "Hi-yi," some of them, and strutting like Indians, making a show for all that their buckskins were worn and black with grease and the fringes down to nothing. One of the eight kept to his horse, though, a big, loose man whose slouched shoulders made a wide arch over his saddle horn. His eyes went around and fixed on Poordevil, as if Poordevil had done something against him. Still looking, he pulled off the handkerchief he had about his head, and Jim saw that a plume of hair grew solid white from a scar at the hair line in front.

"Ain't you gonna light, Streak?" Lanter asked. "Or are you gonna let your tail grow to that there mare?"

They all moved around, talking, telling about the winter, filling the quiet air with sound, all except the big man who still sat his horse with no smile on his face and no word in his mouth.

"Where's Bridger and the rest?" Summers asked.

"Comin' along. We took out ahead."

"How's beaver?"

"We caught a few. The damn Blackfeet give us trouble again, a heap of it."

"Damn the goddam Injuns!" It was Streak speaking, speaking as he looked at Poordevil. "What's that one?"

Summers looked up but didn't answer right away, and Boone put in "Blackfoot" and looked afterward as if he knew he shouldn't have said it.

"What!"

"More like a Poordevil," Summers said. "Let's smoke."

Streak got down off the horse and stood holding his gun. It was a smart rifle, decorated with brass tacks and a pattern of vermilion, as if he had just done fancying it up.

"We got ourselves a few plews," Summer was saying, talking to the rest but keeping the tail of his eye on Streak. "Not so many, though. It's poor doin's, account of floodwater."

Boone stood a little apart, listening.

"A goddam Blackfoot, is he?"

Lanter said, "No need actin' like a sore-tailed bear, Streak."

"This child'll rub that bastard out."

"You'll get kilt yourself." Boone had stepped in front of Streak, between him and Poordevil. Poordevil just stood there, not quite understanding, his eyes going around and his mouth open showing his broken jaw, and his crazy deer-skin shirt hanging comical on him.

"By God!" Streak turned his head around to look at the others, who fell silent one by one and shifted a little, expecting trouble. "You hear what I did? Leave 'im alone, he says, leave 'im alone, us as've been fighting Blackfeet all winter. Leave 'im alone, like as if the Blackfeet didn't send Bodah under, like as if the Blackfeet ain't dogged us all along and put lead in some of us."

He turned on Boone, and his finger pointed to the scar on his hairline. "Whar you think I got this? From old age? Blackfeet, by God, four years ago. Knicked my mare and

knocked her over, the devils did, and took me for dead, lyin' there, but we raised runnin', me and my mare, afore they lifted my scalp."

"It wasn't Poordevil done it."

"One's like t'other, much as two peas."

Jim saw two of Bridger's men nodding as they agreed with Streak. The rest just stood there, waiting for what would happen next, their faces sober and their eyes sharp. Come a fight, he and Boone and Summers and Poordevil figured to get the worst of it, with eight on the other side.

Boone was looking Streak in the eye, giving him a sort of dark, wild look, the kind of look Jim had seen him give just before his temper broke. Boone was a sudden man, acting first and thinking after. Jim wondered that he held in so good now.

"This nigger can outrun, outdrink, outstud, and outfight any son of a bitch that sides with a Blackfoot. Stand out of my way! This hoss aims to raise h'ar."

Jim saw the look on Boone's face that meant he wouldn't stand any more. He saw the look and saw Summers slide between them, moving quick and easy like a young man. "Hold in, now. We aim to get along nice and sociable. I reckon we're plumb glad to see you. But we don't aim to have Poordevil kilt, not by anyone. Not by you, Streak, and not by any of the rest—you, Shutts, or you, Reeson, or Allen, or any of the rest if you're a mind to stand with Streak. If it's blood you want you'll have it, but some of it'll be yours, I'm thinkin'." His gaze fixed on Streak and then went to the others, and there wasn't anything in his face except quiet. Jim stepped over by him, his unloaded rifle in his hand, and there were the four of them together looking at the eight and waiting, four of them counting Poordevil, who had lost his foolish smile, Jim noticed as he moved, and stood quiet but sharp and alive, like an animal waiting for a man to make a move.

For a moment things seemed to hang, like a rock teetering on a slope, not knowing whether to roll or settle, and then Russell said easily, "I wouldn't fight Dick Summers for the whole damn Blackfoot Nation and the Rapahoos to boot." It was like the rock settling.

Lanter grunted. "Me neither. These here are friends. Y'hear, Streak?"

After a silence Streak gave in. "I wasn't fixin' to fight any but that Blackfoot. I'd like his scalp for my old leggin's. I would, now."

He let himself be turned around to the fire and sat down and by and by smoked with the rest, not like a man with a fright in him, but like one just waiting his time.

"We ain't fixed good for company," Summers said while he moved around the fire pushing wood into it.

"We got meat," Lanter said, "a sight of good bull meat—a little blue, maybe, but not as blue as some I've et." He got up, and Robinson with him, and went to one of the pack horses and came back carrying cuts of it.

The others got out their knives and carved themselves pieces and speared them on roasting sticks. Lanter, who looked as old as time and as weather-beaten as any rock, yelled as one of them bent over the meat. "Don't be cuttin' that meat ag'in the grain! Other way saves the blood and juice. Y'hear?"

The dark little man he spoke to looked up, his great eyes seeming to swim in his head, and nodded and went to work with his knife again.

"No more sense'n a fool hen, that greenhorn Spaniard," Lanter muttered. "He'd sp'ile young cow, he would." He watched his own cut beginning to sizzle over the fire. "Treat it right, nigh any meat is good."

"Savin' snake meat," Hornsbeck put in. "This nigger's throat plumb shuts up at snake meat. I et it onc't, after wreckin' a bull boat and losin' everything 'cept my hair, an'

Jim knew that Boone saw him, too, but Boone didn't say anything. He just watched the men ride away and by and by turned to Poordevil and put his fingers to his eye and said, "Nō-waps-spa," and Poordevil bobbed his head.

Chapter XXIII

DICK SUMMERS pulled the hood over his head and brought his capote closer about him. There was no place in God's world where the wind blew as it did on the pass going over to Jackson's Hole. It came keen off the great high snow fields, wave on wave of it, tearing at a man, knocking him around, driving at his mouth and nose so that he couldn't breathe in or out and had to turn his head and gasp to ease the ache in his lunge. A bitter, stubborn wind stung the face and watered the eye and bent the horses' heads and whipped their tails straight out behind them. A fierce, sad wind, crying in a crazy tumble of mountains that the Indians told many a tale about, tales of queer doings and spirit people and medicines strong and strange. The feel of it got into a man sometimes as he pushed deep into these dark hills, making him wonder, putting him on guard against things he couldn't lay his tongue to, making him anxious, in a way, for all that he didn't believe the Indians' stories. It flung itself on the traveler where the going was risky. It hit him in the face when he rounded a shoulder. It pushed against him like a wall on the reaches. Sometimes on a rise it seemed to come from everywhere at once, slamming at back and front and sides, so there wasn't a way a man could turn his head to shelter his face. But a body kept climbing, driving higher and farther into the wild heights of rock, until finally on the other side he would see the Grand Teton, rising slim and straight like a lodgepole pine, stand-

ing purple against the blue sky, standing higher than he could believe; and he would feel better for seeing it knowing Jackson's Hole was there and Jackson's Lake and the dams he had trapped and the headwaters of the Snake—indeed not so far away.

Summers bent his head into the wind, letting his horse make its own pace. Behind him plodded his pack horse led by the lariat in his hand, and behind the pack horse came Boone and Jim and Poordevil and their animals.

It was known country to Summers, the Wind range was and the everlasting snow fields and the Grand Teton that could come into sight soon, known country and old country to him now. He could remember when it was new and a man setting foot on it could believe he was the first one and a man seeing it could give names to it. That was back in the days of General Ashley and Powell and Ted Smith, the cool half-parson whom the Comanches had killed down on the Cimarron. It was as if everything was just made then laid out fresh and good and waiting for a man to come along and find it.

It was all in the way a man thought, though, the way a young man thought. When the blood was strong and the heat high a body felt the earth was newborn like himself; but when he got some years on him he knew different; down deep in his bones he understood that everything was old, old as time, maybe—so old he wondered what folks had been on it before the Indians themselves, following up the waters and pitching their lodges on spots that he had thought were his alone and not shared by people who had gone before. It made a man feel old himself to know that younger ones coming along would believe the world was new, just as he had done, just as Boone and Jim were doing, though not so strong any more.

There rose the Grand Teton at last, so thin, seen from here, it didn't seem real. Summers pulled up to let the horses blow and felt the wind driving through to his skin and clear

to his secret guts, with the keen touch of the snow fields in it. Boone yelled something to him, and Summers shook his head, and Boone cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled again, but sound wouldn't come against the wind; it blew backward down the pass, and Summers found himself wondering how far it would blow until it died out and was just one with the rush of air. He shook his head again, and Boone grinned and made a signal with his hand to show it didn't matter, and afterward tucked his chin around to the side to catch his breath. High to his left Summers could see a mountain sheep standing braced and looking, its head held high under the great load of horn. The trees grew twisted from cracks in the rock, grew leaning away from the wind, bowed and old-looking from the weight of it.

He let his gaze go to the back trail, to Boone and Jim and the horses standing hunched and sorry, their hair making patterns under the push of the wind. They were good boys, both, though different, brave and willing and wise to mountain ways. They were hivernans—winterers—who could ... I an Indian as far as anybody and keep calm and shoot plumb center when the time came. Summers wondered, feeling a little foolish inside, that he still wanted to protect them, like an uncle or a pappy or somebody. It was Boone he felt most like protecting, because Boone thought simple and acted straight and quick. He didn't know how to get around a thing, how to talk his way out or to laugh trouble off, the way Jim did. Not that Jim was scared; he just had a slick way with him. Come finally to a fight, he didn't shy off. Boone, now, was dead certain to get himself into a battle at rendezvous with the man called Streak, and not in a play battle, either. It would be one or t'other, Summers was sure, and shook his head to get shut of the small black cloud at the back of it.

When they were going again his thoughts went back. As a man got older he felt different about things in other ways. He liked rendezvous still and to see the hills and travel the

streams and all, but half the pleasure was in the remembering mind. A place didn't stand alone after a man had been there once. It stood along with the times he had had, with the thoughts he had thought, with the men he had played and fought and drunk with, so when he got there again he was always asking whatever became of so-and-so, asking if the others minded a certain time. It stood with the young him and the former feelings. A river wasn't the same once a man had camped by it. The tree he saw again wasn't the same tree if he had only so much as pissed against it. There was the first time and the place alone, and afterwards there was the place and the time and the man he used to be, all mixed up, one with the other.

Summers could go back in his mind and see the gentler country in Missouri State, and it was rich, too, if different—rich in remembered nests and squirrels and redbirds in the bush and fish caught and fowl shot, rich in soil turned and the corn rising higher than a boy's head, making a hidey-hole for him. He could go back there and live and be happy, he reckoned, as happy as a hoss could be with the fire going out of him and remembered things coming stronger and stronger into the mind.

Anyhow, he had seen the best of the mountains when the time was best. Beaver was poor doings now, and rendezvous was pinching out, and there was talk about farms over on the Columbia. Had a mountain man best close out, too? Had he best go back to his patch of land and get himself a mule and eat bread and hog meat and, when he felt like it, just send his mind back to the mountains?

Would he say goodbye to it all, except in his head? To rendezvous and hunting and set-tos with Indians and lonesome streams and high mountains and the great empty places that made a man feel like he was alone and cozy in the unspoiled beginnings of things? Could he fit himself back among people where he dassn't break wind without looking about first?

A man looking at things for the last time wanted to fix them in his head. He wanted to look separately at every tree and rock and run of water and to say goodbye to each and to tuck the pictures of them away so's they wouldn't ever be quite lost to him.

Jackson Lake and the wind down to a breath, the Three Tetons rising, the Hoary-Headed Fathers of the Snakes, and night and sleep and roundabout to rendezvous, trapping a little as they went, adding to their packs, going on over the divide from the Snake to the headwaters of the Seeds-kee-dee, and then seeing from a distance the slow smoke of campfires rising, the men and motion, the lodges pitched around, the color that the blankets made and the horses grazing, and hearing Boone and Jim yelling and shooting off their rifles while they galloped ahead, drumming at the bellies of their horses. They made a sight, with feathers flying on them and ribbons and the horses' manes and tails woven and stuck with eagle plumes. A greenhorn would take for sure-enough Indians.

Rendezvous again, 1837 rendezvous, but rendezvous of other times, too, rendezvous of 'thirty-two and 'twenty-six and before, rendezvous of all times, of men dead now, of squaws bedded with and left and forgotten, of whisky drunk and enjoyed and drained away, of plews that had become hats and the hats worn out.

Summers' horse began to lope, wanting to keep up with the others, but Summers held his rifle in front of him undischarged. A man got so he didn't care so much about putting on a show.

Chapter XXIV

BOONE felt Summers' gaze on him and, when he looked, saw it sink and fasten on the ground, as if Summers didn't want the thoughts he was thinking to be found in his eyes.

Summers said, "This nigger couldn't hit a bull's hind end with a lodgepole after five-six drinks."

"I ain't had too much," Boone answered after a silence. "I can walk a line or spit through a knothole." He drank from the can of whisky by his side. "It ain't true, anyways. You was some, now, yesterday, firin' offhand. You come off best."

"Didn't have more'n a swallow."

Summers and Jim were rumped down on either side of Boone. Poordevil lay on the ground in front of them, snoring, the whites of his eyes glimmering through the parted lids and the spit running from one corner of his mouth and making a dark spot in the dirt.

"Reckon Poordevil thought he could drink the bar'l dry," Summers said.

"I ain't fixin' to drink no bar'l dry."

It was getting along in the afternoon, and over a ways from them a game of hand was starting up, now that the horse racing was about over for the day, and the shooting at a mark. The players set in a line on either side of the fire. While Boone watched they began to sing out and to beat with sticks on the dry poles they had put in front of them. Every man had his stake close to him. It was skins they were betting, mostly, and credit with the Company, and some trade goods and Indian makings and powder and ball, and sometimes maybe a rifle. They weren't worked up to the game yet.

Come night, and they would be yelling and sweating and betting high, they and others sided across from other fires. A man could make out Streak easy, with his head bare and the sun catching at the white tuft of hair.

Up and down river Boone could catch sight of Indian lodges, moved in closer than usual to the white camp, maybe because the rendezvous was smaller. Nearer, horses were grazing, and still nearer the mountain men moved, talking and laughing and drinking and crowding up with some Indians at the log counter that Fitzpatrick had set the Company goods behind, under cover of skins. The tents of the Company men clustered around the store. In back of them, pack saddles and ropes and such were piled. The lodges of the free trappers, from where Boone looked on, were west of the others, away from the river. Behind the counter two clerks kept busy with their account books. In front of it a couple of white hunters showed they had a bellyful. They were dancing, Indian style, and by and by began to sing, patting their bellies with their open hands to make their voices shake, and ending with a big whoop.

Hi—hi—hi—hi,
Hi-i—hi-i—hi-i—hi-i,
Hi-ya—hi-ya—hi-ya—hi-ya,
Hi-ya—hi-ya—hi-ya—hi-ya,
Hi-ya—hi-ya—hi—hi.

The white men were Americans and French from Canada, mostly, but some were Spanish and some Dutch and Scotch and Irish and British. Everybody had arrived by now—the free trappers and the Company men and Indians from all over, coming by the Sweetwater and the Wind and over from the Snake and from Cache Valley to the south near the Great Lake, from Brown's Hole and New and Old Parks and the Bayou Salade, coming to wait for Tom Fitzpatrick and trade goods from the States. Just yesterday Fitzpatrick had pulled

in, with only forty-five men and twenty carts drawn by mules, but bringing alcohol and tobacco and sugar and coffee and blankets and shirts and such, all the same. At the side of the counter two half-breeds were working a wedge press, already packing the furs for the trip back to St. Louis, making steady knocking noises as they drove the wedges in.

It wasn't any great shakes of a rendezvous—not like they used to have, with companies trying to outdo each other and maybe giving three pints for a good plew. Now there were just the American Fur Company and Bridger and the rest of his old outfit working for it, and whisky cost four dollars and beaver went for four to five a pound, for all there wasn't much of it.

The Crows hadn't brought in more than a mite. They and the other tribes were restless and cranky; they talked about the white man hunting their grounds and about the Blackfeet warring on them and the traders putting low prices on fur and high ones on vermilion and blankets and such. They were crying—that's what they said—because the white brother took much and left little. The mountain men grumbled, too, trading pelts for half what they used to bring and hearing talk that maybe this was the last rendezvous.

It wasn't any great shakes of a rendezvous, but still it was all right; a man couldn't growl, not with whisky to be had and beaver still to be caught if he went careful and the sky over him and the country clear to him any way he might want to travel.

Over his can of whisky Boone saw a little bunch of Crow girls coming on parade, dressed in high-top moccasins and milk and fancy with porcupine quills. Some of them would catch themselves a white man, and then they would get gifts of blankets or whisky or maybe a horse and a powder and ball, and they would be glad to have a white man in the family, and the white man would stay with them a while and then he would up and leave her and she would stay

plumb crazy for a while, taking on like kin had died, but after a while, like as not, she would find another mountaineer, or anyway an Indian, and so get all right again. Sometimes squaws got sure-enough dangerous when their men left them, especially if they left one to take up with another.

Boone saw that Jim's sharp eye had picked up the girls. "Them Crows are slick sometimes. They are, now," Jim said. He added, "And mighty obligin'."

"You ought to know," Summers said and smiled, looking at Jim as if he could see through him, looking at him with a little cloud in his eyes as if he wished he could go back to Jim's age. "Reckon maybe you should take one away with you, and not buzz yourself around like a bee in clover. They ain't after one-night rumpuses so much. Steady is what tickles 'em."

"Jim hankers for the whole damn tribe."

"You ain't so bad yourself, Boone, or didn't used to be. Can't figure you out. Bet you ain't had two women this spree. A body'd think you was still feared of catchin' a cold in your pants."

Some of the Crow girls were smart-looking, all right, and that went. A man didn't get to see so many Blackfoot girls, but there was one of them, if she kept coming along and grew up to her eyes, would make these other squaws look measly.

Boone said, "Must be there's a right smart more goat in you. I had enough colds so's not to be afraid."

The three of them sat for a while without speaking, watching Russell come lazing over from the store, smoking a pipe with a long stem.

"How, Russell."

"Hello," said Russell, and stopped and drew on his pipe while his eyes went over Poordevil. Poordevil didn't have anything on but a crotch cloth that came up under his belt and folded over and ended in red tassels. The sun lay on his



"I wouldn't think so. They're enough Blackfeet on the Galatin and Madison and Jefferson without going farther."

Russell strolled off, still sucking on his pipe.

Boone drank again and then let himself back on his elbows, looking west, yonder to where the sun was about to roll behind the mountains. A current of air whispered by his ear, making a little singing sound. When it died down, the other noises came to him again—the hand players calling out and beating with their sticks, the Indian dogs growling over bones, the horses sneezing while they cropped the grass, and sometimes the Indian children yelling. The sun shed a kind of gentle shine, so that everything seemed soft and warm-colored—the river flowing, the butte hazy in the distance, the squaws with their bright blankets, the red and black and spotted horses stepping with their noses to the grass, the hills sharp against the sky and the sky blue, the lodges painted and pointed neat and the fire smoke rising slow, and high overhead a big hawk gliding.

It was funny, the way Jim and Summers had their eye out for him, not wanting him to frolic until he and Streak had had it out. Boone knew how much he could hold and still move quick and straight. He knew how much he could hold and it was a considerable—as much, maybe, as any man at rendezvous. He wasn't going to cut down on his fun—not much, anyway—just so's to be on guard. Besides, Streak hadn't acted up, not to him, or picked on Poordevil, though he had made his brags around, saying he didn't walk small for any man and would get himself a Blackfoot yet, saying he could whip the likes of Caudill day or night, rain or shine, hot or cold or however. Summers allowed that Streak had held in because there wasn't any whisky in camp until yesterday.

Boone rested back on his elbows, feeling large and good, feeling the whisky warming his belly and spreading out, so that his arms and legs and neck all felt strong and pleased, as if each had a happy little life of its own. This was

the way to live, free and easy, with time all a man's own and none to say no to him. A body got so's he felt everything was kin to him, the earth and sky and buffalo and beaver and the yellow moon at night. It was better than being walled in by a house, better than breathing in spoiled air and feeling caged like a varmint, better than running after the law or having the law running after you and looking to rules all the time until you wondered could you even take down your pants without somebody's say-so. Here a man lived natural. Some day, maybe, it would all end, as Summers said it would, but not any ways soon—not so soon a body had to look ahead and figure what to do with the beaver gone and churches and courthouses and such standing where he used to stand all alone. The country was too wild and cold for settlers. Things went up and down and up again. Everything did. Beaver would come back, and fat prices, and the good times that old men said were going forever.

Poordevil groaned and opened one red eye and closed it quick, as if he wasn't up, yet, to facing things.

"How, Blackfoot."

Poordevil licked his lips. "Sick. God sick damn." He put his hand out, toward the can at Boone's side, and his eyes begged for a drink.

"First time I ever heerd goddam split," Jim said. "Seems on-religious."

"Not yet, you don't," Boone said to Poordevil. "Medicine first. Good medicine." He heaved himself up and went toward the fire and picked up the can he had set by it. It had water in it and a good splash of gall from the cow Summers had shot that morning. "Bitters. That's medicine now." He lifted the can and let his nose sample the rank smell of it. Before he handed it to the Indian he took a drink himself. "Here, Injun. Swaller away."

Poordevil sniffed of the bitters, like a dog at a heap of fresh dung, and brought up his upper lip in a curl that showed the gap between his teeth. He tilted the can and

drank fast, his throat bobbing as he gulped. He threw the can from him and belched, and held out his hand for the whisky. He had a dull, silly, friendly look on his face like a man might expect to find on a no-account dog's if it so happened a dog could smile. Between the red lids his eyes looked misty, as if they didn't bring things to him clear.

Of a sudden Boone felt like doing something. That was the way it was with whisky. It lay in the stomach comfortable and peaceful for a time, and then it made a body get up and do. All around, the fires were beginning to show red, now that dark was starting to close in. Boone could see men moving around them, or sitting, and sometimes a camp kicker jerking a buffalo ham high from the fire to get off the ashes. There were talk and shouts and laughter and the chant and rattle of the hand players. It was a time when men let go of themselves, feeling full and big in the chest. It was a time to talk high, to make jokes and laugh and drink and fight, a time to see who had the fastest horse and the truest eye and the plumb-center rifle, a time to see who was the best man.

"I aim to move around," Boone said, and picked up his empty can.

"Last night you wasn't up to so much, Boone." It was Jim talking. "Me and Dick, we kep' our nose out of the strong water, just in case."

"Goddam it! You going to be dry all rendezvous? I ain't skeered."

Jim didn't answer, but Summers looked up with his little smile and said, "Not the whole livin' time, Boone. Just long enough, is all."

"Best get it over with right now, then."

Summers lifted himself and felt of the knife in his belt and took his rifle in his hand. "This nigger wouldn't say so, son. It's poor doin's, makin' up to trouble. Put out; we'll foller."

"Git up, Poordevil." Boone toed the Indian's ribs.
"Whisky. Heap whisky."

Poordevil hoisted his tail in the air, like a cow getting up, and came to his feet staggering a little. "Love whisky, me. Love white brother."

"White brother love Poordevil," Jim said with his eyes on Boone. "Love Poordevil hesp. He's bound to, ain't he, Dick, with whisky four dollars a pint? Nigh a plew a pint."

Poordevil put on a ragged cotton shirt that Boone had given him earlier.

"What's beaver for?" Boone asked, leading off toward the counter. "Just to spend, ain't it? For drinks and rifles and fixin's? You thinkin' to line your grave with it?"

All Jim answered was, "That Injun can drink a sight of whisky."

From the store they went to a fire that a dozen free trappers were sitting around, telling stories and drinking and cutting slices of meat from sides of ribs banked around the flames.

"Make way for an honest-to-God man," Summers ordered. Boone put in, "Make way for three of 'em."

From the far side of the fire a voice said, "Summers' talk is just foolin', but that Caudill, now, he sounds like he sure enough believes it."

Boone squinted across and saw that the speaker was Foley, a long, strong, bony man with a lip that stuck out as if for a fight.

A little silence came on everybody. Boone stood motionless. "I ain't one to take low and go down, Foley. Make what you want out'n it."

There was the little silence again, and then Foley saying, "Plank your ass down, Caudill. You git r'iled too easy."

Summers lowered himself and put his can of whisky between his knees. "How," the other said now. "More in and set."

Foley started the talk again. "Allen was sayin' as how he had a tool once would shoot around a corner."

"I did that. Right or left or up or down it would, and sharp or gentle, just accordin'. Hang me, I would have it yet, only one time I got 'er set wrong, and the ball made a plumb circle and came back to the bar'l like a chicken to roost. Knocked things all to hell."

"This child shot a kind of corner onc't," said Summers, "and I swear it saved my hair."

"So?"

Summers fired his pipe. "It was ten years ago, or nigh to it, and the Pawnees was bad. They ketched me out alone, on the Platte, and there was a passel of 'em whoopin' and comin' at me. First arrow made wolf's meat of my horse, and there this nigger was, facin' up to a party as could take a fort."

Allen said, "I heerd you was kilt away back then, Dick. Sometimes be damned if you ain't like a dead one."

"Ain't near so dead as some, I'm thinkin'. It was lucky I had Patsy Plumb here with me." Summers patted the butt of his old rifle. "This here piece now, it don't know itself how far it can shoot. It scares me, sometimes, dogged if it don't, thinkin' how the ball goes on and on and maybe hits a friend in Californy, or maybe the governor of Indiana State. It took me a spell to get on to it, but after while I l'arn't I could kill a goat far as I could see him, only if he was humpin' I might have to face half-around to lead him enough. Yes, ma'am, I've fired at critters an' had time to load up ag'in afore ball and critter come together."

"Keeps you wore out, I'm thinkin', travelin' for your meat."

"That's a smart guess now. Well, here this child was, and the Pawnees comin', and just then I see a buffler about to make over a hill. He was that far away he didn't look no bigger'n a bug. I made the peace sign, quick and positive, and then I p'inted away yonder at the bummer and the Indians."

stopped and looked while I up with Patsy. I knowed 'er inside out then, and I waited until the critter's tail switched out of sight over the hill, and then, allowin' for a breeze and a mite of dust in the air, I pulled trigger."

Summers had them all listening. It was as if his voice was a spell, as if his lined face with its topping of gray hair held their eyes and stilled their tongues. He puffed on his pipe, letting them wait, and took the pipe from his mouth and drank just a sip from his can of whisky.

"The Pawnees begun to holler again and prance around, but I helt 'em back with the peace sign and led 'em on, plumb over the hill. Took most of the day to git there. But just like this nigger knowed, there was Mr. Buffler, lyin' where the ball had dropped down on him. I tell you niggers, the Pawnees got a heap respectful. One after the other, they asked could they have meat and horns and hair, figgerin' it was big medicine for 'em, till there wasn't anything left of that bull except a spot on the ground, and dogged if some of the Pawnees didn't eat that!" Summers let a little silence come in before he spoke again. "I ain't never tried any long shots since."

"No?" -

"I figger I ain't up to it. I swear I aimed to get that old bull through the heart, and there he was, plain gut-shot. Made me feel ashamed."

They laughed, and some clapped others on the back, and they dipped their noses into whisky, and their voices rang in the night while the dark gathered close around, making the fire like a little sun. In the light of it the men looked flat, as if they had only one side to them. The faces were like Indian faces, dark and weathered and red-lit now, and clean-shaved so as to look free of hair. Boone drank from his can and pushed closer to the fire, feeling the warmth of it wave out at him. Poordevil squatted behind him, seeming comfortable enough in his crotch cloth and cotton shirt. Around them were the keen night and the campfires blazing and the

cries of men, good-sounding and cozy, but lost, too, in the great dark like a wolf howl rising and dying out to nothing.

"I reckon you two ain't the only ones ever shot a corner," Jim said.

"Sharp or curve?"

"Sharp as could be. A plumb turnabout."

"It's Company firewater makes a man think things," Allen said. "He gets so he don't know goin' from comin'."

"In Bayou Salade it was, and we was forced up for the winter." Jim was getting to be a smart liar—as good as Summers, almost. "I took a look out one morning, and there not an arrer shot away was the biggest by-God painter a man ever see. 'Painter meat!' I says and grabbed up my rifle and leveled. The painter had got itself all stretched out, and lyin' so's only his head made a target. I aimed for the mouth, I did, and let 'er go, only I didn't take into account how quick that painter was."

Jim looked around the circle of faces. "He was almighty quick. The ball went in his mouth fair, and then that critter swapped ends, faster'n scat. I ain't hankered to look a painter in the tail since." Jim fingered his cheek gently. "That bullet grazed my face, comin' back."

The laughing and the lying went on, but of a sudden Boone found himself tired of it, tired of sitting and chewing and doing nothing. He felt a squirming inside himself, felt the whisky pushing him on. It was as if he had to shoot or run or fight, or else boil over like a pot. He saw Summers lift his can again and take the barest sip. Jim's whisky was untouched beside him. Goddam them, did they think they had to mammy him! Now was a good time, as good as any. The idea rose up in him, hard and sharp, like something a man had set his mind to before everything else. He downed his whisky and stood up. Summers looked around at him, his face asking a question.

"I'm movin' on."

Poordevil had straightened up behind him. Summers

poked Jim and made a little motion with his head, and they both came to their feet.

Away from the fire Boone turned on them. "Christ Almighty! You nee'n to trail me. I aim to fix it so's you two dast take a few drams. Come on, Poordevil."

He turned on his heel and went on, knowing that Poordevil was at his back and Jim and Summers coming farther behind, talking so low he couldn't hear. He looked ahead, trying to make out Streak, and pretty soon he saw him, saw the white hair glinting in the firelight. The players chanted and beat on their poles, trying to mix up the other side, and the side in hand passed the cache back and forth, their hands moving this way and that and opening and closing until a man could only guess where the cache was.

The singing and the beating stopped after the guess was made, and winnings were pulled in and new bets laid while the plumstone cache changed sides.

Boone spoke above the whooping and the swearing. "This here's a Blackfoot Injun, name of Poordevil, and he's a friend of mine."

Some of the players looked up, holding up the bet making. Streak dragged his winnings in.

An older man, with a mouth like a bullet hole and an eye that seemed to have grown up squinting along a barrel, said, "Set, Caudill. Who gives a damn? Me, I had a pet skunk onc't, and it wasn't hardly ever he'd piss on a friend of mine, and when he did the friend like as not didn't stink no worse, but only fresher."

Lanter said, "Let's get on with the game."

"What happened to your skunk friend?" Jim asked.

"It was goin' on the second winter that I had him, and I was holed up with two old hunters, like o' Lanter here, and one night old No-Pee just up and left without givin' no reason at all."

"Likely his pride finally got the best of him," Lanter said.

"Twer'n't that. I figgered it out all right. Livin' close

up with two hard cases like you, Lanter, his pore nose got so it just couldn't stand it no more."

Boone waited until the voices had quieted down. "I ain't aimin' to let no one pester Poordevil. Anyone's got such an idee, sing out!"

In front of him a man said, "Jesus Christ! My beaver's nigh drunk up already."

Streak's eyes lifted. His face was dark and his mouth tight and straight. A man couldn't tell whether he was going to fight or not. Boone met his gaze and held it, and a silence closed around them with eyes in it and faces waiting.

Streak got up, making out to move lazily. "The damn Blackfoot don't look so purty," he said to the man at his side. His glance rose to Boone. "How'll you have it?"

"Any way."

Streak left his rifle resting against a bush and moved out and came around the players. Boone handed his gun to Jim.

"I had stepped back, his rifle in the crook of his arm.

"I at the side Poordevil grunted something in Blackfoot

"I Boone didn't understand.

Streak was a big man, bigger than he looked at first, and he moved soft and quick like a prime animal, his face closed up and set as if nothing less than a killing would be enough for him.

Boone waited, feeling the blood rise in him hot and ready, feeling something fierce and glad swell in his chest.

Streak bent over and came in fast and swung and missed and caught his balance and swung again before Boone could close with him. His fist struck like a club head, high on Boone's cheek. Boone grabbed for him, and the heavy fist struck again and again, and he kept driving into it, feeling the hurt of it like something good and satisfying, while his hands reached out and a dark light went to flashing in his head. He caught an arm and slipped and went down with Streak on top of him. A hand clamped on his throat and another clinched behind, and the two squeezed as if to pinch

Summers looked east and west and north and south, hating to say goodbye.

"Fair weather for you," Jim said.

"Purty."

Boone's eyes came to his and drifted off.

These were Summers' friends, the best he had in the world, now that the bones of older ones lay scattered from Spanish territory north to British holdings. There was Dave Jackson, who started for California and never was heard from again, and old Hugh Glass, put under by the Rees on the Yellowstone, and Jed Smith, who prayed to God and trusted to his rifle but died young for all of that, and Henry Vanderburgh, a sure-enough man if green, who lost his hair to the Blackfeet, and Andrew Henry, the stout old-timer, who had died in his bed back in Washington County; there were these and more, and they were all gone now, dead or vanished from sight, and sometimes Summers felt that, along with some like old Etienne Provot, he belonged to another time.

And yet it had all been so short that looking back he would say it was only yesterday he had put out for the new land and the new life. A man felt cheated and done in, as if he had just got a taste of things before they were taken away. He no more than got some sense in his head, no more than hit upon the trick of enjoying himself slow and easy, savoring pleasures in his mind as well as his body, than his body began to fail him. The pleasures drew off, farther and farther, like a point on a fair shore, until he could only look back and remember and wish.

These were his best friends, he thought again, while for no good reason he took another look at the pack and saddle and cinches on his two horses. They were his best friends—this Boone Caudill, who acted first and thought afterwards, but acted stout and honest just the same; this Jim Deakins, who saw fun in things and made fun and had God and women on his mind.

"This nigger oughtn't to be takin' your Blackie horse," he said to Boone.

"Might be you'll need him, goin' alone."

"I ain't forgettin'."

"It ain't nothin'."

"Not many gives away their buffler horse."

"Ain't nothin'."

"Wisht I had him to give," Jim said.

Summers turned away from them. It was sure enough time for a mountain man to give up when his guts wrenched and water came to his eyes.

"Whar'll you camp tonight?"

What did it matter? It was all known country to him, the Seeds-kee-dee Agie and the Sandy and the Sweetwater. There was hardly a hill he didn't know, from whatever direction, or a stream he hadn't camped along. He could say goodbye to one as well as another. Leaving, a man didn't set himself a spot to make by night. There wasn't anything waiting for him at the end, except a patch of ground and a mule and a plow. He would take it slow, looking and hearing and remembering, while one by one the old places faded away from him and by and by he came on the settlements, where men let time run their lives—a time to get up, a time to eat, a time to work, a time to be abed so's to meet time again in the morning, a time to plow and sow and harvest. A man didn't live off the land there. He worked it like he would work a nigger, making it put out corn and pigs and garden trash. He didn't go out when he got hungry and kill himself a fat cow. He didn't see his living all around him, free for the shooting of it. He had to nurse things along, to wait and figure and save.

Things pressed him all around. He had to have money in his pocket, had to dicker for this and that and pay out every turn. Without money he wasn't anything. Without it he couldn't live or hold his head up. Men in the settlements gave a heap of time just to trading money back and forth,

"They put a proper name to it, all right, callin' it Colter's Hell."

Hell might lie underneath, sure enough, in the great unseen hole that echoed to the horses' feet, in the fire that burned under all the land and sent water boiling out of the ground and jets of steam that hissed up and trailed off in clouds on either side of the elk trail they were following. A low stink hung over everything. North and south and east and west the ground was crusted white, like a salt desert. Unless he looked beyond, to the line of hills or the trees sitting dark and hazy on the slopes, a man wouldn't think he was in the mountains. The sun blazed on the white crust, and the crust blazed back into the eyes, so that a rider went along with his face pinched and his lids narrowed.

Poordevil's voice came to Jim in a sudden throaty cry, and then the sucking of a hoof and the scramble of a startled horse, and, looking back, Jim saw the hole that the hoof had made in the crust and the blue steam coming from it.

"Devil nigh caught you that time, Poordevil," he said. "It's skeery, sure enough, Boone," he went on, knowing Boone couldn't hear him but talking all the same. "Almighty skeery."

Boone's hunched shoulders bobbed ahead of him, looking strong and bony under the slack cotton shirt. Beneath the red handkerchief he had tied on his head, his plaited black hair swung to the gait of his horse. His eye was always looking, to right and left and ahead, and his rifle was held crosswise and ready, but Jim knew it wasn't the devil Boone was watching for. Boone didn't worry about hell, or heaven either, but about Blackfeet and the thieving Crows and meat and beaver. He was a direct man, Boone was, and God didn't figure with him. What he could see and hear and feel and eat, and kill or be killed by, that was what counted. That, and sometimes a crazy idea, like this notion of going on beyond the Three Forks where the Blackfeet were thicker than gnats and always hungry for the Long Knives' scalps.

Beaver, Boone said he was after, but Jim knew better. It was little Teal Eye, held secret in Boone's head all this time, and all the time growing and taking hold of him, until finally his mind was made up and God himself couldn't change him.

It was a crazy idea, all right, crazy as could be. Even Bridger, bound just for the upper Yellowstone and the Madison and the Gallatin and the Jefferson, was taking a parcel of men with him so's to be safe. Jim and Boone and Poordevil made only three. And what if Poordevil was a Black-foot himself, as Boone argued? That didn't mean the Black-feet would hold off. Jourdonnais had figured the same way, having Teal Eye with him, but he was dead just the same.

Sometimes Jim wondered why he hung along with Boone. There wasn't much fun in Boone. He was a sober man, and tight-mouthed, without any give in him unless it was with Summers. Go with Boone and you went his way. A man would think Boone would be satisfied now, having his own say-so about going north, but still he fretted because they took it slow and easy according to the promise Jim had finally pinched out of him. There was no sense in hurry, not with boiling springs to be seen and the great canyon of the Yellowstone and other doings that a body couldn't believe. It was only high summer, going on to fall, and the service berries were fat and purple on the lower slopes, and higher up the wild raspberries shone red along the ground. There was meat on hill and hollow, and the sun shone round and warm, and the wind had slackened, saving up for fall. It was a time to loaf, being as beaver wasn't good now anyhow.

Boone was a true man, regardless, cool and ready when there was danger about. He didn't know what it was to be affrighted. And you could depend on him, no matter what. There weren't many would stand as steady with a friend, or go with him as far, or stick through thick and thin. For all that he gave in to Boone, Jim felt older and

can of coffee, and afterward Jim sat back smoking and looking at the hills and the sky. The sun was gone, and dark was beginning to creep on the wooded slopes beyond the lake, but the sky was clear and light yet and the lake lay bright against its edging of earth and timber, like a piece fallen from above. To the east the sun lingered on the very tops of the mountains. Up there a man could see the ball of it yet and get some heat from its shine, but from where they sat Jim could see only a little cloud that it had set afire as it passed. He hunched his shoulders inside his shirt as he felt the evening chill coming on. Overhead, from somewhere or everywhere, there was a high, fine singing. Only when a man was quiet did he hear it, but there it was then, thin and coming on and fading and coming on again, and it might have been the high pines talking, or the mountains, or time humming, far off and old, so that a body felt little and short-lived, so that he felt lonesome and hungry for people so's to forget how big the world was, so's not to be thinking how long a mountain lived. The air was so quiet that the fire smoke climbed straight as a stem. Jim could hear the fire murmuring at the wood and once in a while the sound of a grazing horse, but that was all, except for the thin singing.

He wished for Summers, with his gray eye and slow smile and his easy, knowing way. A body never was so sad and lonesome like this with Summers around. Summers understood how a man felt, and he understood animals and nature, too, and they all seemed to fit together with him and make him at home wherever. Jim could tell that Boone missed him, too, being even silenter than usual and straight-mouthed, with *no ear or tongue for small talk*. It was as if something was lost to them when Summers left, something that helped to make a trapper's life good and satisfying. Jim asked himself why he should keep on hunting the rivers and being alone and half-starved for folks and sometimes at night having the deep, secret fear of death with him like something that shared his bed and pricked him away from

sleep; but he knew he would keep on for a while anyway, no matter why. A hunter's life was a good-enough life if you weren't cut out especial for something else. After a spell you grew into it and just kept going, not knowing anything better. Probably people on farms or in stores or on the river levees got almighty sick of one another and wanted to get off by themselves. For all that he liked company, there wasn't anything could be more tiresome than people.

He sat half-dozing, letting his ears listen. And then he heard Boone say, "Sheepeaters, likely," and he sat up and saw four figures at the edge of the woods behind him. When Boone got up, his rifle in his hand, they melted back into the trees. Boone put his rifle down and stood silent, and after a while they came out again and stood in a line, all of them looking and all waiting.

"I'll see," Jim said. He arose and started toward them without his rifle, wondering if they knew the peace sign, wondering if they could understand his Shoshone talk. He kept a smile on his face and moved slow, and by and by motioned them to come to him. They were a man and a squaw, he saw now, and two young ones, and they stood uncertain and curious, wanting to dart back into the trees but wanting to see more, too. A little flutter of uneasiness went over them as he drew closer, and he stopped, waiting for them to get used to him, as a hunter would have waited to calm down his game.

"The white brother's heart is good," he said in Snake. "The white brother has but one mouth and one tongue."

They listened, understanding but still wary, standing pale in their bighorn skins against the dark of the woods. The man's bow dangled in his hand. Four dogs carrying packs slipped from behind them and saw Jim and growled and then sat down. After a while, as he stood silent, the dogs began to grin.

It all might have been a picture except for the little movement, the Indian's eyes going over him and the squaw watch-

ing and putting out her hands to stay the little ones, and the little ones, forgetting fright, making small, jerky motions like sandpipers.

"The white brother has meat. Will his brothers eat?"

Jim could see the thought working in their heads. Their eyes were still now, and fastened on him as a man might fasten a glass on a distant thing, but fastened inward, too on the food that he offered.

"The red powder and tobacco and beads and a medicine glass to look in." Jim motioned behind him, toward the fire.

The squaw said something low-voiced to her man, and they took a forward step, still watchful and uneasy, but venturesome, too.

Jim turned and made for the fire, and sat down there with Boone and Poordevil, and all of them looked away toward the lake in which a slow cloud floated. No one spoke or pecked until the Indian gave a little grunt, and they turned about to see them standing, open-faced and simple, the man on one side and the squaw on the other, with the two children in between.

Jim took a brand from the fire and touched it to his pipe and pointed the stem up and down and around and held it for the Indian. After he had puffed on it, the Indian held out an old and battered fusil, with the pan open and rusted, pointing to it to show he lacked powder and ball. A three-foot sheep's-horn how ornamented with quills hung from his arm. Jim took lead from his pouch and poured powder from his horn into the Indian's chipped one. The man smiled then and began to make Snake talk. Pretty soon the squaw was talking, too, and the young ones chirping.

"That old musket wouldn't shoot, no matter what," Boone said. "And take a look at the arrer. These is Poordevils, sure enough. Got a stone head, it has." He dug into his possibles and brought out a small looking glass backed with paper, and handed it to the squaw. She looked into it and made a sudden little noise and smiled to see herself. The

children crowded into her and gazed at themselves. Their eyes went to hers, asking questions; for no reason at all they broke out laughing, high and clear like bells. They darted around to the other side of the fire and smelled the meat and pointed to it, wanting some.

Not until then did the man seem to notice Poordevil, but when he did his eyes widened suddenly and narrowed, and he made a motion as if to push his family back.

"Don't be skeered," Jim said, and switched to Shoshone. "The Blackfoot has traveled far with us. He is a brother. He wants peace." Jim studied Poordevil as he spoke. Poordevil let up on his anxious look long enough to give a smile.

The Sheepeater studied Poordevil a while longer and then, as if his fright was over, began talking again. Did the white brother have tobacco? Did he have a knife or an awl? Would he trade ball and powder? Did he want the skins of the beaver or the otter? Beaver were few in the streams now because the Indians had had to make meat of them. They had saved a few skins.

The four dogs were haunched around the fire, smelling the elk meat while their tongues hung out dripping. The Indian went to one of them and from the travois to which it was hitched took a small bundle of furs. He dropped it at Jim's feet.

"Beaver and otter," Jim said to Boone.

The Indian said, "They belong to the white man. Give us what you like."

When they had traded and eaten they moved off, happy at having a butcher knife and an awl and a few rounds for the fusil. Their talk and the laugh of the little ones came to Jim after they were lost from sight, and by littles thinned to an echo and then were gone.

Afterward, when night had closed in, Jim lay on his back facing a sky prickled with stars. It was like the beginning of the world here, high and lonesome and far off from men's doings, and the Sheepeaters might have been the first peo-

One day and another of travel, and the valley still empty and the Blackfeet gone from the face of the earth. At night now they camped careless, building big fires and eating elk or deer meat, or one of the buffalo that had wandered up the valley into the hills. They camped silently, except for Poordevil, who grinned and talked as before, carefree as a young one who didn't know what made his elders solemn. Jim poke little jokes now and then, trying to get shut of the cloud that hung over them but making a poor out of it. The sun rose bright in the morning and shone white and glaring in the day and left the western sky ablaze at night. Later the sky cooled to a red like an old wound, and still later the stars popped out, seeming low and plain as candles in the dark. It was prime weather for fall hunting, prime weather and prime country, but even Jim had quit laying his traps. A quiet hung over things, except for the cawing of crows and the chatter of magpies and the wind's whining in the trees, whipping the yellowed leaves away. At night the call of wolves beat back and forth in the valley, and the whistle of bull elks hot for cows, leaving the night emptier than before. By day Boone would watch the wind ruffling the short grass and worrying the trees on the eastward slope and flowing on out of sight, farther than a man could know, to places a man never had heard tell of. The grass was curled and dry, headed out in darker brown. The feet of the horses raised puffs of dust from it that fell back if the wind was quiet, or streaked away. Riding all day in the wind a man felt the grit in him, in his clothes and down his back and against his skin, and grating between his teeth. So they hunched against the wind, one shoulder up shielding his chin, and his mouth tight-set and dry, tasting the air.

Slanting out from the west bank of the river, they rode from the valley into a basin and threaded through a grove of trees, and it was then they saw their first live bear. It was a horse a quarter of a mile away, and when Boone saw it, he wheeled about and cut his pump-action rifle.

on and forgotten her, as he had forgotten a heap of squaws in his time. With another woman he would have acted like a natural man. His eyes would have been bold and his tongue limber and his hands forward. What was it made him hold back? What was it made him sit wondering, like a boy who hadn't had a taste of women? His eye slid to the side and saw her face quiet and her gaze fixed deep on the running water, and too much thought in her ever to lay tongue to. Could it be she had been waiting for him all this time, saying no to others? Could it be, being as Red Horn had told Poordevil she never had taken herself a man?

He sat silent, feeling unsure and silly, and still it was like talking to her, like letting out how the idea of her had built up in him until he had seen her face in the sky and heard her voice in the breeze. He was that far gone that the flutter of the prairie hen put him in mind of her laugh and the bright pebbles that the stream flowed over set him thinking of her teeth and he never saw a wild goose headed north that she wasn't in his head. He wanted her to come to lodge and be his woman and make his moccasins for him. He would raise meat aplenty; their lodge would have galore of meat, and scalps hanging by it that he would bring from the enemies of her people.

Her breath said, "Boone. Boone," as if practicing a word, and then he turned to face her and his eyes met hers and looked into them, trying to see what lay beyond. "You fixin' to come to my lodge, Teal Eye? You aim to be my squaw? Reckon I want you bad." He pointed at her and at himself and brought the tips of his forefingers together in the sign for tepee. All the time it was like his eyes speaking to her and her eyes answering, saying things that couldn't be said with words or all understood by the mind, saying things that went back many a season to the first days on the Mandan and Jourdonnals talking of the little squaw with an eye like the bluewing teal. A quick, small smile came on her face.

on and forgotten her, as he had forgotten a heap of squaws in his time. With another woman he would have acted like a natural man. His eyes would have been bold and his tongue limber and his hands forward. What was it made him hold back? What was it made him sit wondering, like a boy who hadn't had a taste of women? His eye slid to the side and saw her face quiet and her gaze fixed deep on the running water, and too much thought in her ever to lay tongue to. Could it be she had been waiting for him all this time, saying no to others? Could it be, being as Red Horn had told Poordevil she never had taken herself a man?

He sat silent, feeling unsure and silly, and still it was like talking to her, like letting out how the idea of her had built up in him until he had seen her face in the sky and heard her voice in the breeze. He was that far gone that the flutter of the prairie hen put him in mind of her laugh and the bright pebbles that the stream flowed over set him thinking of her teeth and he never saw a wild goose headed north that she wasn't in his head. He wanted her to come to his lodge and be his woman and make his moccasins for him. He would raise meat aplenty; their lodge would have a galore of meat, and scalps hanging by it that he would lift from the enemies of her people.

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to have a look at things as it went along. Clumps of cottonwood grew on its banks, and chokecherry and serviceberry bushes and wild rose and red willow that the Indians mix with tobacco. No place could be prettier than this valley with two buttes rising to the south and the tan hills ridge wide on the sides, and cottonwood and black birch and sagbrush growing, and elk and deer about and buffalo coming down from the benches to drink. It was a place a man could spend his whole life in and never wish for better.

Looking beyond the stream and over the first hills others that rose round and pointed, Boone could guess how the Teton got its name. Some lonesome Frenchman, likely had looked and been reminded of a woman. Some Big Medicine, froze for squaws, had seen the hills, and it was like seeing a woman lying with her breasts arched and sharp at the rounded hills that had so had nagged him and he had of a woman. He heard the voice increased him. The rings of the breeze and Poordevil taking a step behind him. Over the mountains the sky arched clear and deep so that a man looking let himself be lost in it like a bird floating across the wrists and hugging them over the heart and sign talk for love.

Chapter XXXIV

IT WAS just as Boone had known it would be. There was jerked meat, boiled and cooked with pounded prairie turnips, and the fire warm in its circle of stones, and Teal Eye doing around while the edge of her eye kept on him and her face waited for what might come to her ear or eye. He grunted and sat down and ate out of a bowl and afterwards fired his pipe with the trader's black tobacco mixed with the bark of the red willow. It was a soft-stone pipe he had, with a round bowl on a square base and a willow stem. He had made it himself, after the style of the Blackfeet, and while it wasn't as fancy as some that other tribes made, it was sweet and drew easy. He studied it while he smoked, letting his mind turn things over slow.

After a while, without looking at Teal Eye, he said in Blackfoot, "You will go back to Red Horn and wait."

She didn't need to say anything, not with the quick look on her face.

He counted on his fingers. "After six sleeps we will start." He let his glance go to her while he pulled on his pipe. "Red Hair and I and the white man and two Bad Medicines."

She bent her head and her hands made a little flutter above her leather skirt. She said, "I will get the warm clothes ready."

It was one of the things he prized her for, that she didn't argue. For all that her eyes might say, or her face or her hands, the mouth didn't come out with it. He spoke his mind, and that was that, and he didn't have to fuss about it. It saved a man a heap of bother.

Her look questioned him again, and he answered. "In the

real. There was the sharp awareness of a wild animal in his face, but nothing more.

A strange man, Boone Caudill, riding rawboned and louched at the head of the column while his Indian's braids wung to the swing of his horse. A strange man, with moodiness in him, and quickness to anger and the promise of a hildlike savagery. Was it the rude half-civilization of the Kentucky frontier that had made him what he was, or his years with the red Arabs of the plains? Watching him ride head, his strong shoulders loose and his body giving to the pace of his horse, Peabody concluded he was more Indian than white man. Outwardly he was hardly white man at all. He wore the clothes of an Indian and carried a bag of amulets—a medicine bundle, as it was called. His voice was rough and deep in his chest, even when the sounds it made were English sounds. His face was dark-eyed, weathered, and often inscrutable. He had a squaw for a wife.

Caudill could be a difficult man, even a dangerous one, Peabody imagined. One of gentler breeding sometimes felt uncertain and impotent in his presence, as if the strength and forwardness and primitive masculinity of the man dwarfed any disciplined powers. Peabody shrugged that feeling away while his eyes ranged far out on the plains. A Yankee could hold his own in any company, by wit and courage and perseverance, as Yankees had demonstrated through generations. Caudill would be a penniless white renegade among the Indians long after his own enterprise and vision had made him comfortable and important.

His eye came back up the canyon, following the winding stream, until it reached the pack string and saw Deakins sitting quiet on his horse at the tail of it, waiting for Peabody to go on. Deakins grinned; showing a flash of teeth. He and Caudill had come from different molds. Where Caudill was silent, Deakins talked; where Caudill flared out, Deakins fashioned a joke; where there was in Caudill the suggestion of quick ferocity, there was in Deakins the indica-

Chapter XXXV

FROM high in the canyon one could look down on the foot hills and far beyond them to the yellow plains shimmering under the early winter sun. Elisha Peabody checked his horse. It was an enormous world, a world of heights and depths and distances that numbed the imagination. One felt inclined to draw into himself, like a turtle. The mountains were loftier than any Peabody ever had seen; the streams were swifter, the wind fiercer, the air sharper, the view vaster. It occurred to him that everything had been made to giant's measure; it was as if proportion had run wild. The great sprawling magnitude of the west made the hills and parks of home seem small and artificial, like a yard with a picket fence around it.

The human soul inclined to extremes, too. Yesterday it had soared, feeling wild and free, feeling so inconsequential among these physical immensities as to be lost to the sight of God and His wrath. Last night, with the great darkness crowding in, it came back like a bird to roost, sensing the awful power and glory of God all about. Peabody knew humility then, and prayed for guidance and strength and God's favor, without which even Yankee ingenuity could be of no avail. Today there rode with him a small burden of oppression that no circumstance could account for, unless it was that the worldless vigilance of Caudill had given rise to a vague and foolish misgiving. More than once Caudill had hitched around in his saddle to study the way they had come. Under the black brows his eyes were always busy, scanning the slopes, the timber, the stream, the game trails. What his eyes told him his mouth did not utter or his expression re-

veal. There was the sharp awareness of a wild animal in his face, but nothing more.

A strange man, Boone Caudill, riding rawboned and slouched at the head of the column while his Indian's braids swung to the swing of his horse. A strange man, with moodiness in him, and quickness to anger and the promise of a childlike savagery. Was it the rude half-civilization of the Kentucky frontier that had made him what he was, or his years with the red Arabs of the plains? Watching him ride ahead, his strong shoulders loose and his body giving to the pace of his horse, Peabody concluded he was more Indian than white man. Outwardly he was hardly white man at all. He wore the clothes of an Indian and carried a bag of amulets—a medicine bundle, as it was called. His voice was rough and deep in his chest, even when the sounds it made were English sounds. His face was dark-eyed, weathered, and often inscrutable. He had a squaw for a wife.

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tion of considered action. Whimsicality was a part of Deakins' make-up, and humor, half-sly, half-innocent, so that one never quite knew the depth of his perception. The two constituted a good if godless pair, the one balancing and conditioning the other.

Peabody kicked his horse, and heard the pack animals behind him clumping into action and Zenon chattering French. He could picture the smile on Zenon's face, the mouth mobile and expressive under eyes as eloquent as any maiden's. He could see his small hands moving as he talked. Occasionally he heard Beauchamp answer Zenon's fluent words. Beauchamp was a heavy wedge of a man with the neck and shoulders of a bull and a skull inhabited by a slow brutal wit. Against Zenon's quick understanding he matched his muscle, as if in the final reckoning it was force that told the measure of a man. He liked to show the knot of muscle on his biceps and to seize Zenon's arm afterward and make him wince with the power of his grip. He had liked to, that is, until Deakins interfered on their second night out from Fort McKenzie.

"If I was Zenon, now, I would shoot that damn hand off yours off, I would," Deakins had said. Peabody saw, with a little turn of astonishment, that the twinkle was gone from his blue eyes.

Beauchamp let go of Zenon. It was an instant before he answered. His gaze traveled over Deakins as if measuring his strength. Then he said, "By damn, me think you need one fusil, to stand with Beauchamp."

Before Deakins could answer, Caudill stepped around the fire. Wordless, he walked up to Beauchamp. Peabody remembered how deliberately he stepped and how suddenly he struck. Miraculously, Beauchamp kept his feet. He staggered back, almost falling but caught his balance and stood silent as if allowing time for thought to turn in his head. He brought up his hand to feel of his jaw. His eyes dropped from Caudill's face and went to the ground and hunted

around. Peabody was reminded of a mouse seeking a hole.

"There ain't no real fight in him, Zenon," Caudill said. "No need to be afeard of him. He only looks like a man."

There had been no trouble since, nor, Peabody imagined, was there likely to be any. Beauchamp was like an ox tamed by the whip, with no resentment in him and no impulse to revenge. Day by day he did his work. Altogether, thought Peabody, he had a good crew. He turned his mind away from the reasonless oppression he felt, thinking of the good crew, the open weather, the purposeful progress they were making. Oregon lay just beyond the hills. God willing, he would reach the Columbia.

As they traveled the canyon, bearing to the southwest, it seemed more and more logical to assume that God was willing, for the way lay wide and easy, except for windfall and the new growth that had sprung up along the trails that forgotten Indians had worn. On all sides the mountains lifted in great peaks and bulges of rock, thrusting so high that white clouds moved among them; the wind blew the keen breath of winter, sometimes with the spit of storm in it; but the pass rolled on, gradual and safe and bare of snow. It was more than Peabody had dared hope for, by thunder. Looking into the future, one could see pack trains climbing, and carts and four-wheeled wagons piled with settlers' goods, bound for the fertile valleys of the Columbia. They would be free men, these, without a slave among them—free men going to free country to establish what would come to be free states of the Union, once the claims of the British had been dismissed. Afterward the lanes of commerce would open, replacing the long, slow sea route around the Horn. He could see cargoes going up and down the Missouri and the Columbia and being transshipped across the mountains over the very ground his horse trod—cargoes of processed goods and imports, of textiles, tools, rifles, coffee, tea, and sugar, flowing west in exchange for the products the settlers had wrested from the new land. How could South Pass,

blow along the edges of old snowbanks, Boone saw that green had tipped the plains.

"Early," he said, "for spring. Way early."

"Can't come too quick for me," Jim answered, "not after the winter we been through." They let their horses stop after the climb. "Buffler country again. Look on it, Boone. Ain't it good for the eye?"

"Seems like my eye's been caged in by mountains and trees. Seems like it wants to run now, like a dog off a rope."

The plains rolled out below them, mile on mile of plain dipping away and meeting up with the sky at the edge of the world, and the air so clear and fine that the gaze ran dizzy. Not so far away a little bunch of buffalo grazed ragged against the new green, and beyond them a band of antelopes streamed light and quick as if not bound to earth.

Jim said, "Jesus!" as he squinted into the distance, and after a pause went on, "Old Peabody wouldn't know to like this. It would drive him back on himself, being so Christlike and free."

"Wonder what he's doing now?"

"That little nigger was all right. Bet he does good. Bet he gets his chin set and his mind fixed and his mouth to making talk and does all right."

"He could talk a man out of his squaw, right enough. Look what he done at Flathead House."

"Wasn't talkin' alone. Part was just Peabody, honest and straight-speakin' and gritty, too. I can see him now, palaverin' with them British and bringin' them around to his way for all they wanted to shy from it. None could out-nabob him."

What Boone saw, though, when he thought back to the winter, was not Flathead House and the British and Peabody arguing himself into a new outfit, but Jim sick, and rock goats like scraps of cloud among the peaks and the snow so deep the tops of the young pines looked like grass.

above it. He called to mind the warm wind and then the cold and crust and the four of them going slow down the western slope and traveling Clark's Fork later and dropping down to the Great Plains of the Columbia and reaching the river and going on almost to where the Snake came in before Peabody allowed maybe he and Beauchamp could make it alone. He remembered Jim getting stronger and good-spirited and his red hair gleaming in the sun, and the weather fair enough, though sometimes bitter still, and he and Jim forted up, after Peabody and Beauchamp had gone on, waiting for the passes to open while the thought of Teal Eye and his young one kept working in his head.

"Nigh talked me into goin' plumb to the western ocean with him, Peabody did," Jim said. "Ain't no Teal Eye waitin' for me."

Boone turned and grinned. "I'm a growed man now. Reckon I could've made it back alone."

"Thought I best come along. Pups is quick to say they're full dogs." Jim kicked his horse as Boone's started up.

It was past the time when the great owl nested, past the moon of the big winds. Teal Eye looked for him, standing maybe at the entrance to the lodge and facing west, hoping to see, far off, the fleck that would come to be a horseman and the horseman coming to be her man. Red Horn would have seen there was meat in her tepee, and Red Horn and the young Piegons would be friendly enough. A thing done was a thing done, and no need to think more about it. He had a medicine glass for Red Horn, so's he could light his pipe from the sun, and shells for Teal Eye that had come from the sea. With his spurs he pricked his horse to a faster pace.

"Weather's so damn soft it can't go on," Jim said while he watched a bird sitting white-breasted on a bush. "Winter'll come back and nip growin' things and freeze the tail off that there early bird."

"Think so?"

"It's certain sure. Never knowed it to fail. Leave good days come, and a man better set hisself for bad. Only it's fat today, ain't it? So quiet and gentle-like, and grass shooting up and all."

"It is, now."

"If you listen, you can might' nigh hear things growing. I crave to unfork my horse and get my ass unsprung and just lie around and eat and sleep and let the sun shine on me. Hope Teal Eye'll be on the Teton, like you think, and not to hell and gone on the Judith or Musselshell or somewhere."

"She's there, all right, if only she could coax Red Horn into it."

"Same place?"

The same place, with the clear stream winding in the cottonwoods and trout feeding on the first frail-winged flies and the hills pointing up like a woman's breasts, and Teal Eye standing there again and crossing her wrists and bringing them over her heart so that the breast pushed out at the side, and Poordevil saying "Heap punkin!" through the hole in his jaw. South, the two buttes would be rising, and buffalo would be lazing down from the benches and the black birch blowing and the valley lying unspoiled and quiet between the ridges as if just waiting for a man to see. He had been a long time away, up the Marias and over the hump and down the Flathead and far along the waters of the Columbia and then back, up the River of the Road to the Buffalo and across the top of the mountains again and down the Medicine, past the sulphur springs that flowed warm and stinking from the rocks and gave the river its name. Everything seemed a long time away, Teal Eye and the Teton and all, with so much in between that it was as if he never could get remembered feelings back. Time lay between him and that other day, time and all the miles he had traveled and all he had seen and done. But once he was with her, everything would come right again. Once she lay

by him, he would be himself. He could sit again and let time run on, not caring that it did, while the breeze played among the lodges and the sun shone yellow on the grass.

"Too nice to last," Jim said again, rising and stretching in his stirrups. "Enj'y it now, on account you'll have ice on your whiskers tomorrow."

"What makes you such a sorry man? You ought to take yourself a squaw, Jim, a good squaw."

"Maybe it's many squaws as has made me sorry."

"You ought to take one and stay by her, for a spell, anyhow."

"I'm thinkin' not. I won't never settle with one. Like a grasshopper, I am, jumpin' one place and then another, and no sense to know good from bad."

"You're too choosy, maybe. One's like another."

Jim looked at Boone and then spit over the shoulder of his horse. "You'd as soon stay on with them Flathead and Nepercy women then?"

"I got me a woman a'ready."

"Sure. Can't everybody be so lucky."

Boone let Jim's words turn in his head, looking at them one way and then another without fixing his mind sharp on them. It made him proud inside to know that another set store by his woman, but it made him a little edgy, too, like a dog with a bone. It was good Jim was his friend and Teal Eye was Teal Eye, else a man might worry himself.

The mountains fell away behind them, reaching high and jagged into the sky and the blue of distance settling on them. Gophers heavy with the young ones they carried piped at the horses and dived underground, their tails whisking, as the horses came close. A badger, surprised while he chewed on a dead bird, lumbered off to one side and halted on the mound of earth he had scratched up digging a hole and watched them with a slow blaze in his eyes.

To his right Boone caught a glimpse of the westward one of the two buttes, peaceful in the low afternoon sun. They

would see the valley soon, the quiet valley of the Teton, half meadow and half trees, where Teal Eye had said she would try to meet him. Maybe she had birthed the young one now and would be slimmed down. Maybe her eyes reached out and soon would see him as just a speck moving down the ridges. He hoped it was a coming man she had and not a little squaw. Squaws didn't grow up to be fighting men with scalps on their leggings and gun covers. Squaw's lives weren't much no matter what.

The benches fell away in front and curved out at the sides, and in the cup the Teton lay just like before. They let their horses come to a stop while they took it in, neither one speaking until Jim said, "Ain't it a camp I make out, Boone? Yonder, in line with the hill that pushes out?"

"Wondered if you'd spot it. Red Horn's Piegans, for sure, like Teal Eye promised."

At the foot of the slope Boone spurred his tired horse to a trot. This was coming home again. It was like doing, awake, what was left from a dream. It was like doing what he had done before, as if he was just coming to the Teton and smallpox had scattered the Piegans and silence hung over the country. If he turned, he might see Poordevil and the red horse trotting proud. It was like that other time, except now he knew she waited for him.

When they were still a half mile from the village, some Piegans jumped on horses and came galloping. One turned out to be Heavy Runner, with his hair wild and his skins dirtier than before. Boone heard Jim making palaver while he sat his horse and gazed yonder at the village. It was a fair-sized camp now, Red Horn's was. Dogs ran out from it, making a racket around the horses as the Indians led the way in. Squaws watched and went to chattering as they went by, saying Strong Arm and Red Hair had come back. An old Indian raised his eyes from a looking glass and stayed the hand that had been plucking the hair from his face, lifting it after he saw who passed. A woman came out of a

dge, her eyes wide like a watching doe and her body like a girl's. Boone rode to her and dismounted, seeing sadness and trouble both in the face. Jim called, "How be ye Teal Eye? Still purty as a pet bug, you are."

Teal Eye didn't speak. She reached out, almost as if afraid to touch, and placed the palms of her hands on Boone's neck and stroked them over his chest while tears came in her eyes.

"Later'n I thought," Boone said while his gaze took her in, "but I come back." His eyes questioned her, but still she didn't say anything. He went on in Blackfoot. "Have you given me a son? Does Strong Arm have a son?"

Her mouth said, "Yes," but something waited in her face as if she had not told him all.

"I want to see him, Teal Eye," Jim said. "Let me git a peek, too."

Her hand made a little motion toward the lodge. Boone stepped past her, inside. The lodge was thin and old and let the sun through, but still, coming from the shine, he had to wait to see. After a little he spied the baby on its holder, with a skin over its body and a hood drawn over its head so that nothing showed except a small and withered face. Boone bent over and laid the hood back.

From behind him Jim said, "Damn if it ain't got a touch of red in its hair! Maybe grow up to be purty like me."

Teal Eye breathed at Boone's side. The English words stammered on her lips. "Eyes no see. Eyes got sick. No see."

The baby stirred at her voice. The lids pulled open. Before they closed again, Boone saw the eyes swam shrunken and milky-blind.

coming even if the weather didn't know it. A week of cold weather and the cottonwoods would bust their buttons, the diamond willow run out leaves as narrow as snakes' gues, and at sundown a man would hear the killdeer cry-

Spring made a man feel good and sad, too, and wild sometimes, wanting to howl with the wolves or strike north with the ducks or fork a horse and ride alone over the far side of the world into new country, into a fresh life. Spring was a good hurting inside the body. It made laughter come easy, and tears if a man didn't shut them off. Come a soft night, and he could sit under the sky and watch the stars and the moon and listen to running water, and he would feel a reaching inside of him, a reaching for things he couldn't get out—for a woman, maybe, who was all he ever could sink up and more, for the quietness a man never seemed to have until he looked back and saw he had passed it by, never knowing. Old times came back to him then, so's he felt like crying over them, and old friends he had traveled with and parted from, never thinking that those times and those friends would come to be an aching in him. Jourdonais and Dick Summers and Poordevil, and long days on the Mandan and nights on the Powder and that evening in Colter's Hell with the first people and the fine, high singing overhead and the air itself breathless, and all of them gone from him now except as pictures in the heart.

Spring made a man a little crazy. It gave him ideas he wouldn't want to own to—ideas like baying the moon or flying with ducks, sharp beginnings of ideas, like finding a certain woman willing, that he pushed quick from his mind. Anyhow, spring made some men crazy. Maybe not Boone. Maybe not a man that had a Teal Eye for his squaw and wanted nothing but to go on as he was. Maybe there was just one big hunger that other hungers grew from.

Jim rode down into the valley of the Teton where the stream turned north. He climbed the far slope and halted

his horse on the high nose that separated the Teton from the Missouri. He saw Fort McKenzie below him, with only three tepees pitched about. Beyond it the Missouri flowed wide, shining silver in the sun. The valley would be green with leaf soon, and a man stopping on the nose would feel shriveled with the wind and sun and would kick his horse downhill to meet the cool breath of the valley. The breeze was still raw now, and the trees stood naked below. Cold had followed that first taste of spring along the Medicine, as Jim had said it would.

The feel of the country settled into Jim, the great emptiness and age of it, the feel of westward mountains old as time and plains wide as forever and the blue sky flung across. The country didn't give a damn about a man or any animal. It let the buffalo and the antelope feed on it and the gophers dig and the birds fly and men crawl around, but what did it care, being one with time itself? What did it care about a man or his hankerings or what happened to him? There would be other men after him and others after them, all wondering and all wishful and after a while all dead.

Jim tried to shake the miseries from his head. It was Boone being so sully that made his thoughts sorry, or the wound he had got and the long hunger. He clucked to his horse and rolled in the saddle to its downhill jolt. Where the ridge leveled off, he spurred the horse to a gallop and pulled up short before the outer gate. A Frenchman peeked through the pickets and swung the gate open to let him through and closed it tight afterwards. There wasn't an Indian in the store except for a couple of squaws that showed by fancy fixings of ribbon and red cloth that they belonged to the men in the fort.

"Where's the customers?" Jim asked.

The Frenchman gestured with his hands, saying only God knew. A clerk eyed Jim, his hands palms down on the coun-

ter. "Only customers we get these days are ugly customers," he said.

"They'll be liftin' your hair if you ain't careful, from what I hear."

The guard at the inside gate carried a good Hawken in the crook of his arm. He studied Jim as if to make sure he didn't need killing.

There wasn't much doing inside the grounds. Over by a shop three pork eaters were sorting and mending gear. They and the guard were the only men in sight except for Alexander Harvey, next man in line to Chardon, who sat in a doorway out of the wind sunning himself. The flag overhead snapped in the breeze, and the sun ran along the cannon that was kept aimed at the gate.

Jim said "How" to Harvey and slid off his horse. He rested his rifle by the door and sat down in the dust. The horse nosed off, hunting for a spear of grass on ground that the Company horses had picked bare while being kept up for fear of Indians.

"I got beaver in my pockets and my pipes is dry," Jim said. "None of your pizen, either, but good drinkin' whisky with some age to it and the taste of wood."

Harvey let his squinched eyes travel over him. "Particular, ain't you? We got plenty of whisky in the store yonder."

"I said good whisky."

Harvey got up as if he didn't want to and stepped inside and came out with a jug and two cups. "Just come from the Piegans?"

"Red Horn's band, up the Teton."

Harvey poured the drinks, his strong, thick face downturned on the jug. "What kind of medicine they makin'?"

"British, mostly. Likely they'll go to Fort de Prairie for trade. You know why."

Harvey tightened his mouth. "What's their talk?"

"They're sayin' you and Chardon ought to have your

black hearts cut out. Likely right, too. Where's Chardon anyway?"

"Out. Can't stay in this goddam fort all the time."

"Takes all hands with him, don't he?"

"Maybe needs to."

"What I hear true, that you aimed to rub out a whole bunch of Bloods? Loaded a cannon with trade balls and trained it from the blockhouse and got your riflemen set and asked the Bloods up to trade?"

Harvey said, "Red bastards! We only got five of them and no horses. Things went wrong. They run off without their furs, though."

"What was behind it?"

"Member that nigger Reese? Friend of Chardon's?"

"That real, black-skinned nigger?"

Harvey nodded. "The Bloods killed him. Made Chardon mad as all hell. It was me told him how to get even."

"Don't see how you can expect the Piegons to come here for trade."

"Didn't do anything to them."

"Doin' it to the Bloods was the same thing, to their way of thinkin'."

Harvey drained his cup. "They'll come back," he said and sucked a drop of whisky from his lip. "What's Caudil doin'?"

"Trappin' a little. Huntin' buffler."

"How's he feel?"

"Got other things on his mind, I'm thinkin'."

"That's good."

"It is, now. He could make things bad if he took it into his head to lead the Piegons against you. They could run you out, dead easy, firin' down from the hill across the river. Only I don't guess Boone'll do that way. It ain't like him to scheme a thing. He acts quick and sudden."

"Soon kill a man as look at him."

"He's all right."

Harvey refilled the cups. "Smart squaw he's got." The thick face had a far-off, searching look. "Prettiest anywhere. He switched at his moccasin with a stem of grass. The corner of his mouth made a little dent in one cheek. "Maybe you could tell how is it."

"You're a damn fool."

"About some things, maybe. Not about that. Not about you, Deakins. You and minks are turned the same."

"She ain't that kind."

"Good Jesus! I haven't heard that kind of talk since church let out. What squaw ain't?"

"All the same, she ain't."

"Me, I would like to have a chance, with Caudill maybe a thousand miles away. There isn't a squaw but would trade, offer her enough beads or red cloth or face paint."

"You got a surprise comin' if you try."

Harvey's face showed he was already trying in his mind. For a little, Jim's thought ran away from him, seeing Teal Eye and himself with her and nothing about but the shielding willows rustling in the breeze and the grass waiting. He jerked a leg straight and got out his pipe and tobacco. A man had some wild ideas when the spring sap ran in him.

"Reminds me," Harvey said. "Got a letter for Caudill. It come with the winter express from Pierre. You want to take it to him?"

"Might as well. You want any meat raised?"

"Ought to have enough when Chardon and the rest come in."

"I'll just take the night, then, and put out tomorrow. Pour another drink. I told you I got beaver to spare. And set a bottle by for mornin', for I look to have a head."

The next morning, riding back the way he had come, he was glad he had the bottle, or what was left of it after the first drink. He felt tired and beaten down. He had a thickness in the head and a slow ache behind his eyeballs that pulsed to the jog of his horse. The wind blowing out of the

north with the sting of winter still in it made his eyes stream. He pulled up and wiped the water away and took the bottle from the overlapped folds of his buckskin shirt and poured a big drink into himself. He would feel better after a while with the whisky catching hold again and the air fanning his head clear.

The sun, just raised above the eastern sky line, shone flat across the plains. The dead grass bent to the steady wind, above the green that had started up from below. A half-dozen crows raised from down in the valley and shouted after a big hawk that flapped straight ahead as if all he wanted was to get away from their noise. Tatters of clouds blew out of the north.

It was a raw and lonesome day, with nothing in it but the rush and whistle of wind and the worn land standing to it. It was a day when a man felt small and out of kilter, and hankered for people and frolics and walls to keep the weather out. It was a day when he hankered to be close to somebody, to be understood and made over, so's the weight of loneliness would be lightened. Boone, now, liked weather. He didn't seem to need man or woman to keep his spirit strong. He didn't seem to need even little Teal Eye warming his lodge, and her voice soft and her manner gentle and her big eyes quick with feeling for him. He liked wind and storm and emptiness, as if they were company enough; but not many did. Not Jim Deakins, riding along with a case of whisky sickness and a low heart.

The wind kept up all day and was still blowing as he went on again next morning after he had made a lonesome camp and suppered on a chunk of meat that Harvey had given him. Time went so slow the mind could believe it stood still. The sun rose a little way in the eastern sky, shining on Jim's back, and stopped there as if dreading to come full into the wind. The plain crawled ahead of him, making tired-like for the mountains ridged far against the western sky. His horse lagged over it, putting a few spears of grass or a sprinkle

of rocks under him as he stepped, and facing, head down, to an ocean of grass and rocks enough to make a peak. Off to the side one gopher chased another—a he and a she, probably, working up to a family. By little the shadow shortened and grew to nothing and by and by began to point the other way. The wind blew itself out except for scattered leavings that puffed along trying to catch up. By the time the sun went down, even the leavings were gone. A still twilight lay on the world, darkening slow to night.

Boone brought his lids down little by little, screening out the valley below him and the ridge that rose beyond it and at last the sun itself except for the red light that swam through. This was how it was to be blind, not to see the buttes and the mountains against the sky or the wooded line of the river, not to see the coyote trotting far off or the camp in the trees or Big Shield and Bear riding toward him, not to see even the hand held close before his face but only the red swimming and maybe not even that. Maybe only thick and steady darkness like in a cave or out on the plains at night with the clouds drawn low and not even one star peeking through. A man couldn't find a trail or sight a rifle; he would have to feel his way like a worm and hope someone would bring meat to him. He would have to learn the sun by its feel and the land by the touch of it under his feet and people by the pitch of their voices or the whispered way of their step. He would have to listen for things, as Boone listened to the soft plod of the horses that Big Shield and Bear rode.

"Strong Arm sleeps," Big Shield said, and then Boone let his eyes come open. The two Indians slid from their horses and sat down and lighted their pipes.

"The buffalo has gone away," Bear said after he had drawn deep. "Only old ones are left here—only wolves' meat. We have looked in the four directions, Big Shield and

I, and the herds are far off toward the new sun. They have run before our hunters. It is time to move."

Big Shield bowed forward in the sign for yes. "We are here too long."

"Our trappers come back to the lodges without beaver."

"The beaver have been taken. The spring lift is small."

"The camp makes a bad stink because we stay too long."

Boone let them talk. They were warriors yet, but with years growing on them and a liking for slow palaver while they smoked in the sun. A blind man hearing them would wonder if the words were made by tongues and lips like his own working in faces like his hands told him his was itself. Boone shut his lids again, trying to figure what he would make out the two to be if he had only his ears to tell him. After a while he heard Bear say, "You cry inside, Strong Arm."

Bear's eyes were old and tracked around by wrinkles but still sharp as a hawk's. Boone dropped his own before them and picked up a rock and began digging at the ground with it. He was of a mind to laugh or say it wasn't so and to go on to something else, being as his feelings were nobody's business, but Indians were easier to talk to than whites and medium friends easier than close ones. He drew back from showing Jim what was inside him, as he drew back from showing Teal Eye, feeling weak and shamed for them to see but it was different with two old Indians who wouldn't add to what he said or pry beyond for more.

He nodded slowly. "Is there medicine to make the blind eye see?"

Big Shield said, "Our medicine men make medicine, but blindness is too strong for them."

"It is better to go under," said Bear. "It is better to kill the blind."

"I cry for the blind one in my lodge."

Bear nodded. "I cry for my brother who cries. Does Red Hair cry?"

Boone nodded. "Jim cries. He is my brother, too."

Bear put more tobacco in his pipe. "It is for him to cry." His eyes went to Big Shield for a yes. "It is for Red Hair to cry."

For what seemed a long time Boone searched Bear's face, which was cut and puckered by time and thought. Bear's old lips sucked at the stem of his pipe. His breath pulled a whiff into his lungs. Then he met Boone's gaze and answered the question in it with another. "Does the black eagle father the red hawk?"

Boone heard his own voice like a crack in the long silence. "You make light talk."

Bear's gaze was roaming the valley again. "It is you that make light talk," he said. "You know. When a man knows it does not matter. I have given my wives for whisky and powder. I have given them to show I was a friend. It was all right. When a squaw sneaks out and her man does not know, then he feels blood in his eye."

Big Shield knocked the ash from his pipe and got up. "I had a wife, and she lay in secret with a man." He rested his finger above his nostrils. "I cut her hair off and her nose and put her out of my lodge. I took two buffalo horses from the man. I found other squaws. Life was good again."

They climbed on their horses and jogged down toward the village.

Teal Eye said, "Red Hair went to Fort McKenzie."

"Who told you?" Boone watched her fussing with the baby, her eyes dwelling on the blind eyes as if of a sudden they might see.

"He came to ask for you."

"For me, was it?" Boone asked and shut his mouth on what he might say next. There was puzzlement in her face, as if she couldn't make out what he aimed at. He looked at the baby and looked away and looked again. The red wasn't bright sorrel like Jim's hair, but it was red just the same—

red crossed with Indian black and showing dark on the head like the bark of old spruce. Did the black eagle father the red hawk? He got up and stood for a while unseeing, feeling sick and swollen with suspecting, feeling like a man snake-bit, the pain small and sharp in the beginning and the mind numb but unbelieving, and then the bite spreading and the flesh puffing and hurt bursting the body. He would ask if he could believe the answer, but a woman that had tricked a man would lie to him.

To her back he said, "Better to kill a blind baby."

The words spun her around. She got up slow, her face showing shock over the sorrow that had been there before. "Boone!"

"He is better dead."

"You don't mean what your mouth says!"

"You heard. How long will Red Hair be gone?"

She lowered her face from his, as if she had looked for something and not found it, and turned back to the baby. Seeing her droop, he felt mean, but fierce and pleased by meanness, too. He watched her out of the tail of his eye, wondering what secrets were in her, wondering what she kept from him. Morning, and his talk with Bear and Big Shield, seemed so long ago that he had lived a lifetime in it. There had been the pinch of pain and the unbelieving, and then the remembering, then the figuring, while the pain grew and the unbelieving littled and such a misery came in him as the spirit couldn't stand. He knew well enough that Jim was drawn by Teal Eye. He had seen a hundred things to make him know and heard a hundred more, though he hadn't believed that Jim would do him bad. It was Teal Eye he had misfigured, thinking it was no more than liking she felt. It was Teal Eye, bent over with her back to him and maybe the secret held dear in her and her body remembering the touch of Jim's.

All at once he couldn't stand to be there longer. "No

llin' when I'll be back." He threw the English of it at her. Three or four sleeps."

She didn't answer, but he knew she followed him with her eyes as he went out. It occurred to him while he walked to his horse that maybe she was thinking that with him gone he would have a chance with Jim.

At first he rode just to ease himself, making his horse drive into the wind, feeling the good, hard lash of it against his cheeks and the honest push of it on his chest. Wind was something a man could stand to, and he goddamned to it. It was something he knew. It was something he could figure, and no doubt and no waiting and wondering about it, and no black poisoning of the blood. Later he noticed that he was making in the direction of Fort McKenzie, and a plan took shape in his head. Already Teal Eye believed he would be gone from the lodge for three or four nights. He would ride to McKenzie and make out to Jim that he would be out of the village for a time looking for buffalo and beaver-setting and a likely camping place. Then he would watch, and then he would follow. He would set his trap and see what came to it and so find out quick, maybe, whether Bear was right. It stood to reason he was, the more Boone brooded on it, remembering the smiles Jim had for Teal Eye and the long, slow looks and words like posies, and her face lighting up at the sight of him and the pleasure in it at his talk. Bear and Big Shield took it for sure he shared his squaw with Jim. More than likely the whole band did, and because of things they'd seen, being wrong only in thinking the sharing was his doing. Damn himself for a fool, going along blind while they played behind his back and made sport of him! All the time he had figured Teal Eye was his alone and never to be anybody else's. He had lain with her at night and felt richer than other men to have her and so deep satisfied he couldn't talk about it, even to her, for the feeling was like a weakness in him, like a secret that had to be kept in his own skull, hidden under his own ribs.

As the sun went down he hobbled his horse in a gully where a trickle of water ran and climbed out of it afterward and made toward the three antelopes he had seen from the other side. He tied his handkerchief to the end of his wiping stick and lay down with his rifle and held the stick up so that the flag fluttered in the wind. The antelopes danced in, darting back now and then and afterward dancing closer, until he had his sights on one and let his finger bear on the trigger. The two lit out like birds after the shot, their white rumps gleaming, but the one squirmed broken in the grass. Boone made his supper from it.

The night came on so black he couldn't tell where earth left off and sky began. Lying under a buffalo robe with his saddle for a pillow, he couldn't see a wink overhead or the top of a hill round about. He might as well be blind, except for thinking the sun would rise again. He lay lost in darkness, with up and down and sideways all the same, and the torment swelling in him as his mind ran out, picking up things seen before and things heard and felt, making up things that hadn't happened yet. Jim talking. Damn if it ain't got a touch of red in its hair! Bear talking. Big Shield talking. It is for Red Hair to cry. When a man knows it does not matter. I cut off her nose and put her out of my lodge. Life was good again. Himself talking. You was nigh the only friend I had, Jim. Leastwise, I thought so. Don't see how you could treat me so, me as trapped and traveled and drunk and played with you and saved your hide to boot and trusted you with Teal Eye for all I know you're horny. You done it, though, and now, goddam you! Himself talking. Wisht I would believe you, Teal Eye, but sayin' it ain't so don't make it not so. Wisht I could take you back like before and tell you all that was in me. I ain't been one to talk. Talkin' comes hard, but you knowed I was gone on you all along. You didn't have to go somewheres else to find a man as really wanted you. I catched you, though. No use to beg. Bear talking. Breeze talking. Night talking. Does the black

eagle get the red hawk? So goddam dark tonight a man can't see a thing.

The wind woke him up, tearing at his robe. The sky had paled to a dead gray. In the east the sun showed it would be up directly. Boone ate and caught his horse and rode on.

The sun was straight overhead when he spied a horseman traveling toward him. Pointed as he was, the man would pass maybe a long rifle shot to the south of him. Boone angled his horse to the left behind a screen of willows growing along a little marsh, not trying to figure out why he did except for thinking he didn't want to talk to anybody. He dismounted and watched through the willows. It was plain the rider hadn't seen him for he kept coming straight on, sitting his horse bent-headed and letting the horse just laze along.

It could be Jim, from the looks of him, bound back to camp from McKenzie. It could be Jim riding slumped over and off his guard and thinking about Teal Eye and all. After a while Boone saw it was Jim, sure enough.

A slick man would ride out and tell Jim he aimed to go to the fort and farther and wouldn't be back for a time. He would make double sure his trap was set. A slick man would see the red hair and smile just the same and maybe shake hands and never fear for what his hurt and hate might make him do. Boone stood and looked, and it was as if all feeling held still and tight-drawn, too, while Jim came on and passed and drew off to the west.

When Jim was a safe piece ahead, Boone climbed his horse and followed. The trap was set good enough already, and no long waiting to find about the catch.

From the top of the ridge Jim barely could make out the village. A fire or two glimmered from the wide basin that the river had cut through years stretching back farther than any man could think. The lodges were like half-seen shadows against the deeper shadow of the land.

The dogs barked as he drew close to camp, and ran toward him, coming dim into a sight like sound taking shape. He spoke to them and yelled his name to let the Piegiens know who came. A squaw stood at the entrance to the lodge, making a lump of darkness against the firelight inside and watched him pass by. Boone's tepee glowed from built-up fire.

From in front of it Jim called, "Boone, I got a letter for you."

No answer came.

"Where's Strong Arm, Teal Eye?" He could see the shadow of her moving inside, and he dropped from his horse and poked his head in.

She straightened, standing near the baby lying on its holder. "He went to hunt. He will not come back tonight."

Jim stepped inside and set his rifle against a lodge pole and held up a little way from her. It came to him, seeing the firelight lying on her face, that he never could remember how like a girl she was, or how open her eyes were and how hurtful. She was a surprise each time he saw her. "I brought a letter for him, from Fort McKenzie."

She didn't reach for it, but took a long, slow look as if she could read it unopened in his hand. Her face lifted then to his, and he recognized the sadness in it, not sadness shown by a frown or wrinkles or the mouth turned down, but spoken from the heart. He felt his own heart fall, and swell with pity for her.

She asked, "It comes from his people?"

"I think so."

"It will take him away."

Jim fell back into English. "Hold on now, Teal Eye! And if he goes, he'll come back. He won't ever pull away from you."

Her voice wasn't much more than a whisper. "My baby blind, and Boone mad with me, and the white people's letter to take him away." Her face lifted to him. "I am afraid,

Red Hair." Her head went down, and a little shudder ran over her, and she took a short, uncertain, turning step that seemed to Jim to have all of hopelessness in it. He didn't know when he went to her. He only knew his arms were around her and her head was on his chest.

Into her hair he murmured, "Now, punkin. Things'll come right."

She let him hold her, and pity ran in him and anger at Boone and at things, and then the pity and the anger drew back before something else. He felt her body against his, felt her breath hot and quick on his throat, felt her breasts on his chest and one slim leg touching his own. Harvey's words leaped before him, Harvey's words and the wild picture that had darted into his own head and for just an instant the man in him reared, and it was as if this time, this doing, this having her was bound to happen all along and nothing and nobody on earth to stop it.

His hands came fierce to her arms and held her out while he searched her face. She was like a bird in his grasp, a caught bird that held quiet for what he would do, its heart racing inside the breast, its eyes wide and pitiful, with dark and secret waters flowing.

And then he felt her trembling and knew again the sadness in her face, and sense came to him and understanding, and the man in him melted. He bowed his head over the dark hair and held her easy, knowing he could never take her. It was the blind child that let him hold her, the child and the fear of losing Boone, and Boone so jailed inside himself she couldn't know his heart or show her heart to him.

"Teal Eye," he said while his hand patted her. "Pore Teal Eye."

Boone rounded to the south so as to approach the village against what little breeze there was. This way he wouldn't rouse the dogs. A hundred yards from the camp he dropped

off his horse and went ahead on foot, picking his path and setting his feet down soft. He felt the blood beating in his head and his muscles tight and the whole of him strained and ready as if it was sure what he would find. He made himself stop and breathe deep and loosen up. He made himself remember it was just an off-chance his scheme had worked already. He tried to tell himself he could be wrong. But when he started walking again, the blood beat and the muscles tightened. Once among the tepees he stepped sure and confident, to show to anyone who watched that he was at home, but he still went quietly, not wanting the sound of his movements to reach into his own lodge. There was starlight around the tepees and dying fireglow from inside and the sounds of sleeping.

His lodge pointed up before him. He stopped at the side of it to listen, but all he heard at first was the heavy thumping of his heart. All he saw was one shadow standing dim against the wall of skins. Then a voice spoke, low and soft as a man might speak to a woman when heat was running in him. He heard it say "Teal Eye" and didn't wait for more. He cut around to the opening and ducked and shouldered inside.

They didn't see him right away. They didn't hear the brush of his clothes against the lodge. They stood there making one shape, making the one shadow he had seen against the wall. He knew what was doing now. He knew what he had to do. No use to talk or think or wonder. No use to ask or plan. A man's body acted for him. He said "By God, it's like I thought."

They fell apart, and Jim said, "Boone!" and didn't say more but stood trying to smile and the firelight showing guilt on his face as plain as day and flashing on the fear Teal Eye's eyes. Jim's arm came out, stiff and clumsy as stick, and Jim's mouth said, "I brung a letter for you."

The pistol was better than the rifle. Jim cried, "Boone!" as he saw it coming up, and Teal Eye tried, t

e, to throw herself between and so to save her secret man. oosed in by walls, the pistol sounded big.

Jim staggered back, feeling as if his whole chest was npty, feeling as if it had been sunk in by a blow. He tried straighten. He made his legs walk him toward the door or a breath of the air he was dying for. He fell on his face. t was all he could do to turn over. He wanted to cry out. le wanted to say it wasn't so. He wanted to own up that he ad a crazy minute, but no harm done and Teal Eye not to blame. The words wouldn't come; he couldn't get the wind or them.

"I ought to cut your goddam nose off!" It was Boone, turned on Teal Eye. She didn't answer. She didn't move, except that the tears came to her eyes and glimmered in the firelight and started down her cheeks in two big drops.

Things seemed a far way off, so far away the voice couldn't reach, far away and fading farther. Jim saw legs at the entrance to the lodge and followed them up and came to the faces of Indians thrust inside and nothing showing in them but the asking look of animals. One of the faces said, "Him go under."

Boone stooped and whipped up the letter, and his voice lashed at Teal Eye. "No good to cry. By God, I caught you!"

Jim sucked for air. He had to speak. He had to explain. You're a hard man, Boone, and closed in on yourself, and Teal Eye sad with the blind baby and afeared of losing you, and no one to let it out on, no one but me. No harm done, Boone, no harm at all. I wasn't no more than a chest to cry on and a hand to pat her back.

He couldn't catch air enough for talk, not more than a drop of it before pain bore down and shut it off. He felt if he looked down he would see his chest blown open and the heart beating naked and the lungs twisting for air. He heard Boone's voice like a whip and Teal Eye trying to answer and heard the Indians grunting and saw them pushed in at

the door and Teal Eye with her child's eyes wet and pleading.

It wasn't any use to try for words or breath or time; it wasn't any use but to lie quiet while the eye saw and the ear heard and the heart bled itself out. Far off, it seemed, Boone was moving, marching to the entrance with the letter unopened in his hand, marching with his head up and the braids swinging to his step while the Indians made way from him and he passed from sight. Jim brought his gaze to Teal Eye, standing as if too hurt to live and her girl's body drooping and the open, dark eyes crying as they looked the way that Boone had gone. "You no come back," she said in English, so low Jim hardly heard. "You no come back."

This was the way it was at the last. A man faced up to death alone, his sight dimming and his hearing dulling off, and he so lonesome the heart squeezed up to nothing and the mind drew back from thought. The world pulled away from him, the lodge and the air and the clouds and dark hills outside and folks that stood about, until only the ground he rested on seemed close. This was the way it was with Jim Deakins, laid out with a bullet hole in him and no one alongside to touch his hand and ease him over. This was the way it was with Deakins, who had been ready to wrong a friend and spoil a woman's life and had got hold of himself but messed things up all the same, and now no chance to set them right. He had to lie helpless and lonesome, but not much afraid any more, while over him and over the lodge that shut him in the deep sky deepened over the empty plains. He heard talk, breathed by the breath but not sounded by the voice. "I'll know about God, I reckon, now." After a while he realized that it was his lips that had spoken.

Part Five



1843

Chapter XLIII

WINTER was gone from the valley of the Missouri, but spring hung back. The time was an in-between time of ray rains and angry spells of wind and a muggy chill that kept the clothes damp. Waking in the mornings, Boone felt his skin grained and stiff against the touch of his buckskins. Buffalo still hung to the shelter of the brush waiting for the gun, lunging in the mud along the shores as the pirogue startled them, staring after it with dull, bad-tempered eyes pushed about by winter hair. Overhead the mallards flew in pairs, their wings whistling, and slid down to the water and swam with their heads high as if on watch for nesting weather. Along the banks the leafless willows whipped and gray-trunked cottonwoods waited, holding bare limbs up.

"Meanest by-Jesus time of all," said Old Man Mefford while he worked the steering oar and squinted down river out of a face frosted with white stubble. "She ain't winter or summer or spring or fall or foul or fair but just, by Jesus, nothin'. Savin' a spear or so of grass, everything's dead and bare as a fresh-skinned bull. I can stand cold and hot and snow and dust and all, but this here knots my guts. Makes a man down on his luck, it does. Almost wished I'd traded these here furs at Union, 'stead of boatin' 'em down

to St. Louis for the extra in it. Beaver's lower than a snake's belly anyhow. How'd you do, Caudill? Done traded yours I s'pose?"

Boone sat with his back against Mefford's two-year catch of furs. They were covered by buffalo hide drawn tight by lashings. He glanced at Mefford and at the river and at the right-hand boatman in the bow. The boatman looked up, expecting an answer.

"Them Crows," said old Mefford after giving Boone time to speak, "they're the thievin'est bastards this side of hell, I reckon. Don't know how I ever got out with the plews I did. And sharp, too. They can spot a cache a eagle couldn't. Five seasons ago, it was, me and another cached the purtiest fur a man ever see, dug out the ground careful and laid the sod back on top and toted the extra dirt to the river. Afterwards we scared a bunch of buffalo across the place and rode away sayin' there wasn't a nose or eye in man or brute as could tell there was beaver underneath. But, by Jesus, them Crows did! Warn't a hair left, come spring. You mixed with the Crows, Caudill. Ever see the beat of them for stealin'?"

The oarsman put in, "The Assiniboinés, they know to steal, too."

"Them Rocks! Piddlin' people if ever I see any. Ain't as good as plain niggers, be they, Sam?"

"Niggers is good at stealin'. They sho' is. Kin lift a hen off a roost and she never cluck." Boone shifted, seeing Sam at the left oar and his teeth flashing white in his black face. Half the time Sam sat with a sleepy smile on his mouth and the oar forgotten, thinking of hog meat, maybe, and sweet potatoes and corn bread, and maybe a black woman that waited for him. Sam was a free nigger whose five years were so near up at Fort Union that the Company let him go, him and the other oarsman, a Frenchman who went by the name of Antoine. When they learned Mefford was fixing to put out from Fort Union and needed help with the two small dugouts he had hitched together and built a platform across to make

siroque, they asked to go along, being so eager to get back the settlements as to brave the fear of Indians.

"Piddlin' is what I say, eh, Caudill,"

Things changed in twelve years. Banks caved in, and bars d whole islands washed out, and the river gouged new ds, so that a man returning wouldn't know where he had en except for the hills lying as always and streams feeding . He would look for a point or a growth of brush that had en fixed in his mind by something happening, but he ver could be sure he saw it, the way the river ran. He ver could say it was right here that such and such took ace.

"To bad your ma never l'arn't you to talk, Caudill, so's e could pass the time of day. It's a comfort, talkin' is." Mefford's faded eyes half-smiled at Boone and went on to e Frenchman. "He don't hardly hear me. He needs to be ith folks. Been in the hills so long he's growed dumb like ie and his tongue no good but to lick with."

Old Mefford talking day and night, talking just to hear imself, talking as if to make sure he was alive and not razy, talking because at last there were ears to hear, old lefford talking and sometimes the boatmen joining in, telling with a shine in their eyes what they would do back in ie States, and sometimes Nigger Sam singing sad while the agged banks streamed by and the dead land waited for pring. You couldn't stop old Mefford. A sharp look ouldn't still his tongue, or a sharp word, or anything this ide of a killing.

"When was it I seen you last, Caudill? In 'thirty-seven, varn't it, on the Seeds-kee-dee there below Horse Creek? Was a redhead with you, and Dick Summers as was ready to leave the mountains. You rubbed a man out, I recollect, throwed his arm out of socket and stabbed him with his own knife. I remember that redhead for the fun in him. Where's he at, anyhow? What became of you atter 'thirty-seven? It's like you crawled in a hole."

"What if I did?"

The river looped through the long land of the Assiniboines, striking one way and another like a hurt snake that couldn't remember to make for a hole. It ran aimless and cold among the hills, leaving a muddy suds along the banks. It ran like a river lost, hunting a way to the sea, brown as old leather by day and black against the bleached slopes by night. Tied up at islands with the sun gone from the sky and the darkness thickening and the dim stars caught in the water, Boone listened to the worried mutter of it, listened to the talking-to-itself, to the sound of hunting along the shores, while Old Man Mefford clacked away and Sam and Antoine laughed and the wet wood popped in the smudge they had built. "Ain't hardly seen an Injun. Not hardly a nit, by Jesus. Safe as a church, it is. Safe as any goddam church. Puts me in mind of a time—" Far overhead, out of sight in the dusk, Boone heard wild geese on the wing, making late for the north. Their voices carried down to him, the small honks of one to another, keeping up courage for the flight in the dark. "We never sighted even a moccasin track all that spell, or I'm a nigger." The moon rolled up and threw a long shine on the water. From the shore a hoof made a sucking sound as it pulled from the mud.

A man learned things in thirteen years—and went empty and numb with the learning except for the quick angers in him. He let the sun shine on him and the wind blow him and sights come to his eye and sounds to his ear, and never thought beyond. He was like a dumb brute, with yesterday lost behind him and tomorrow dim ahead and just this here, just this now, counting with him, just the sun and the wind and the river and trees and hills. Only he could play with the notion of evening a score, like with the sheriff at Paoli. He could think to get back at people and feel his jaw setting solid and his insides reaching for the time.

The river hunted through the hills and turned sharp as if it had found the way at last and streamed south to the old

country of the Mandans and the Rees, past the Knife River, the Heart, the Cannonball. The Mandans were gone now, dead of the smallpox, and the Rees had pulled out before the Sioux, and the villages of both were fallen and rotted, with bushes growing where men had sat solemn in palaver and animals feeding where the *Mandan's* hot crew had groaned over Ree squaws in the dusk. It was only the hills that remained, only the river, and it too busy to remember except sometimes at night when the sky lay quiet in it and a man looking down jerked his eyes away, not wanting to see what was pictured from before. Past the Grand the river went, past the Moreau and the Cheyenne, deep into the country of the Sioux, past old forts weathered down and pulled apart for steamer wood, past new ones, past forts going up and the sound of hammers knocking and hails from the shore, and all sliding by and being lost to sight and hearing as if they never had been.

It wasn't often they saw Indians except around the forts. "Safe as any church, I tell ye," old Mefford said out of his brush of white beard while Sam and Antoine nodded, their faces slack with feeling safe. "Red devils won't rub you out, will they, Sam?"

"No Injun gonna git this niggah. This niggah rollin' home."

Mefford's old eyes were always watchful, running quick along the river and the shore while his hand worked the rudder. "Maybe talked too soon, yestidday and afore." His gaze was slitted against the shine of the sun on the water. "Pawnees, ain't they, Caudill, and more'n a few?"

"Sioux."

The Indians stood on a point, a dozen or so of them, and waved for the pirogue to put in.

"Sioux or Pawnee or what the hell, we won't mess with 'em."

"Ah got no business with Sioux," Sam said, for once busy with his oar.

"Wave, you red bastards, and see what it gits you!" Mefford had pointed the pirogue toward the farther bank. "No cause to be skeered," he said to the boatmen. "Red men can't shoot for shucks—not with guns, they can't."

Antoine had better leather in him and more sense than most Frenchmen. His oar moved sure and steady, and his face had the cool look of figuring the danger and counting it small.

The Indians lined up along the bank, their hands hanging straight at their sides. As the pirogue drew abreast and kept to its course, two of them raised guns. Smoke puffed in little clouds, the two balls plopped into the water short of the target, and the crack of the musket shots came after. The Indians pranced on the point. Their cries carried sharp across the river.

"Couldn't hit the ground with them old smooth bores," Mefford said. "Howl, you brown skins! Squaws, are we, and afeared to fight? Since when did dogs git to talkin'?"

"Red and thievin' bastards they all are," he went on as the Indians passed from sight around a bend. "A good Injun is a dead one, I say, for all that some mountaineers say dif-

Sam was grinning, now the danger had passed. "Squaws good," he said, his eyes remembering. "Sho' is."

"Not so much. A man comes to think they're some, on account of there's no whites about. Alcohol and river water and tobacco juice tastes good if a man can't get whisky. And roots is better'n to starve. Mountain men fool themselves, braggin' on this and that, but all the time knowin' better inside. Ain't it so, Caudill? Answer up. By the look of you you know red meat."

"Answer for yourself. Your goddam tongue ain't happy without it's waggin'."

"'Scuse me. By Jesus, but you're a touchy man. Must be you et a cactus by mistake and got stickers in your gizzard. What a man in a fix like yours needs, now, is to open his

wels. Ain't nothin' cheers the spirit so. If you're beat w'n, squat down, I say, and get the load from your eeches."

Antoine smiled as he brought the oar through. "Old men, so old for women, they think bowels."

"Lose his courage, old man do." Boone looked around, not knowing what Sam meant at first. "Kin only grunt." Sam shook his head as if the thought of his manhood gone made him sad.

"This child wouldn't know about that," Mefford answered. Have to find someone older'n me by a damn sight. I'm fit, am, as a young bull in rich grass. Nary ache or pain or ailure nowhere." His mouth closed for a minute and his eyes fixed far off. "Know what? A nigger off by himself does a power of thinkin'. Wonders about things and builds up a sight of questions, and no answer to 'em. Why'n't the stomach feed on itself, you reckon? I was four days without meat when that p'int come up, and damn if I know yet. Why ain't it fixed so's a man feels always like he does with a good cup of whisky in him? Why's men willin' but women mostly's got to be bought, with beads or paint or promises said before parsons, dependin' on their skin? Crow Nation says it's all right to steal, but not the government, by Jesus! Gimme the why to that."

The talk went on, morning to dark, one day after another, steady like the churn of water along the banks, like the risen river that rushed the pirogue along, past the White and the Running Water, as if in a fever to be rid of its burden.

A steamboat stood to the current, her stacks pouring smoke and the wind screaming against her and the water boiling against her bow where a man worked with a pole, feeling for depth.

"Omega," said Mefford, watching the side wheels beat at the water, "and, by Jesus, she ain't makin' a inch. Losin' ground, be'int she? That wind'll blow her stacks down." He waved as the pirogue came on. "How there, you beavers."

Looking out at hills set small and close and the sky pale and low overhead and the trees thick enough to smother him, he was half a mind to turn about and strike out as he had struck out long before. Only it couldn't be the same again, his life couldn't—not any more, not for a while, no matter how much he wanted the world big again and the way clear and the air blue and deep above. A hard and aimless anger edged up in him, wanting something to take itself out on. He shifted himself on the pirogue.

A settler's cabin stood in a clearing, and the settler himself hung to the handles of a plow pulled by a team of mules. He whoaed the mules when he saw the pirogue and leaned on the plow to watch, a big man dressed in ragged linsey stained with walnut. His voice boomed out, "Hello, you mud cats."

"Hello, grayback."

"Grayback maybe I be, but I ain't never seed a mud cat I couldn't handle."

"You been foolin' with minners." To Boone, Mefford said, "What gits into these damn farmers makes 'em want to mix with river men?"

The man shouted, "Pull up, if you dast, and shake the water from your pants and stand up to an honest-to-God man."

"Where's he at?"

"You're lookin' at him."

"Don't see nothin' but a pair of mules and what one dropped behind him."

"They don't call me Bull for nothin'. Shut up or pull up and goddam to you either way."

"Bull, is it? I'd take you for a steer, now."

"I kin change your mind for you. Ain't fought since yesterday, and I'm full and splashin' over."

Boone said, "Pull to!"

Mefford peered out of his old eyes. "You want to go at him?"

"Ain't a man among the four o' ye," the farmer yelled.

"Pull to!" Boone said again.

Mefford ordered, "Put 'er in!" and moved the steering oar.

Boone jumped ashore. He saw a woman with a rag tied over her head come out of the cabin door carrying a corn-shuck broom.

The man wrapped his line around the plow handle. He came to meet Boone. There was the fighter's light in his face and the fighter's loose ease in his movements. A grin came on his broad face. "Ain't many as'll stop any more. Stranger, ain't ye? Reckon it wouldn't be right to do my best."

"You want to fight or just talk?"

"Fight's my name and fight's my nature, and holdin' back this way sours my milk."

Still smiling, the man came in, his head ducked like a bull's, his thick arms out in front of him. Nigger Sam yelled, "Fix 'em, Ol' Cranky! Fix 'em!" Boone waited until the man struck, waited until he felt the blow hard and solid on his face, and then he let go, standing flat-footed and braced so as to get power in the blow. The one lick stopped the farmer. His head jerked straight and his body swung off alance. He went down hard when Boone struck again and lay on his back with his eyes only half open. After a while he grunted over on his side and looked up while Boone waited. There wasn't any grin on his face and no pleasure in his eye, but only a dull surprise. A trickle of blood ran from his broken lips.

"Get up if you want to fight."

"Don't you dast, Henry!" It was the woman, rushing between them while her mouth spouted words. "You stay right there. Hear?" Her gaze swung to Boone. "You got murder in your hands and murder in your eyes, or I don't know gee from haw. My man fights just for fun and shakes hands after and makes friends." She raised the corn-shuck broom.

"You git! Git off our place, you—you murderin, white Injun, you!"

"He asked fer it."

"Git!"

Boone turned. Mefford was piling back into the pirogue, and Sam and Antoine after him. "Push 'er out, Caudill," Mefford cried, chuckling. "I can stand to men's talk but not to skirt scat." The pirogue eased out into the current. "He won't forgit that lick, by Jesus!"

The man had climbed to his feet. He stood with his arms limp and the smile broken on his mouth and the light knocked out of his face.

Boone didn't guess he would dare a mountain man again.

Chapter XLIV

"**B**Y JESUS," old Mefford said, "Here's doin's. Ever see the like of that, Caudill?"

At the Independence landing a steamboat was pulled up, its smokestacks cold, and men were rolling barrels and carrying sacks from her. A couple of skiffs lay close by, rocking to the pulse of the river. On the bank other men bustled around white tilted wagons hitched to droop-eared mules or oxen standing lazy in the sun. The men pushed and lugged and lifted. They strode to the water's edge and struggled back with their loads and stuffed them through the tail holes of the wagons. They swore at the teams, their voices full-throated and strong with purpose. "Whoa, you, Bess! Whoa, Jack! I'll beat the tarnal hell out of you, you wood-headed bastards!" Downstream a piece, as if too polite to stand close to the swearing, two women watched. A small boy pulled at one of them, wanting something.

Mefford said, "Hurrah for Conestoga! I ain't ever seen movers till now."

"Crazy sons of bitches!"

"Likely so. but it ain't catchin'. We'll have a whiff of 'em." Mefford slanted the pirogue to shore. Sam jumped out and tied up, and Antoine and Mefford got out after him. "Come on, Caudill." He lifted his voice, aiming at a man walking back to the steamboat. "What you fixin' to do?"

The man stopped and spit in the dust. "Where you been anyhow?"

"Up river."

"Must have caught your head in a hole, not to know."

"We hearn a word or so, but a man can hear anything."

The man spit again while he measured Mefford. "Bound for Oregon, that's what." He walked on, as if what he said was enough to still the tongue.

Sam and Antoine and Mefford drifted off, watching as they went and stopping to talk when someone would hold up for it.

The wagons arched high over Boone in the pirogue. They stood big against the land and sky, seeming big enough to roll the country flat to a man seated low on the water. From a hill, now, or out on the plains they wouldn't be as much as a bug on a hide.

Boone wondered if Dick Summers had seen them. He wondered if Dick watched from some place now with the little smile on his mouth and the wrinkles drawn around his gray eyes. He aimed to talk to Dick, but not anyway soon. He didn't want to see him now, nor anybody else in particular.

"Passel of 'em. Hundreds. Maybe a thousand over town-way."

The man who had come idling along the bank didn't quite look at Boone. Just the tail of his eye looked, traveling from Boone's moccasins to his leggins to the red cotton shirt

e had put on for summer to the handkerchief he wore on his head.

"They're buyin' and tradin' and meetin' and electin' and all."

"So?"

"There's a world of 'em. God hisself only knows how many, and all hot for Oregon." The man ran his hands into the pockets of his homespun pants. "Don't know nothin', most of 'em, about travel. I give 'em some advice. 'Take a lintlock, not a cap gun,' I says. Right, warn't I?" His eye looked for an answer and, finding none, shifted off again. "What good's a cap gun without caps, and where you gonna find caps in Oregon? 'Take a plenty of cured meat and flour and some sweetenin',' I told 'em, 'and stache the sweetenin' in the flour so's not to break the glass.' A body needs a sight of things, travelin'—pots and kittles and knives and salt and yarbs and dried stuff and beans. Can't get along with just a little old plunder bag full. Right, ain't I? I reckon they could use me, if it was so's I could go along. I done traveled a right smart in my time, maybe not as much as you, from the looks of you, but a right smart all the same."

One peg boot came out and scuffed the ground in front of him. "Wisht I could go, but a man with ten in his fambly can't light out like a bird. I done spent too much time in bed, I reckon. A man can't do everything." His eye, set in a face that had got old without growing up, went to Boone again, expecting a smile or a nod or a yes said by the mouth. It was a weak and shallow eye that drove away easy. "Got to stay hereabouts, hitched to a plow like a mule, account of my fambly. Ain't nothin' in farmin' in this country, neither, just work and sweat and no money or fun. Not like in Oregon, where things grow big and rich without hardly no trouble at all." The eye lighted, thinking of Oregon. "What you say? A man with ten children and a woman wore-down-like, you think he could make it?"

"You got no business in Oregon."

"No?"

"No more'n these others, the goddam fools! Ought to stay home and not spoil a country as wasn't meant for the like of you."

The man's jaw sagged like a scolded boy's, and the shallow eyes rounded.

"Stick to your bed and your birthin'. It takes a sure enough man for Oregon." Boone drove the eye away again.

The man's face had gone empty and still as if waiting for thought to come to it. He turned it toward the ground and watched one boot push out and then the other. His mouth worked as if to speak, but nothing came. He sidled off, his shoulders drooping under his worn shirt. A man might feel sorry for him except he was a fool. He might feel sorry except, by God, it did good to get him told.

Mefford said, "There she is, you niggers, old St. Louis herself, just waitin' for us. Me, I'm dry as a year-old cow chip, and I hanker for women and play and all. Get up river! Get up, pirogue! This coon can't stand to poke."

"I'll git off yonder." Boone motioned with his thumb.

"What!"

"Yan side."

"Not gonna spree in St. Louis!"

"I told you yan side."

"By Jesus!" Mefford wagged his head while he changed course.

Antoine put in, "Caudill, he have something better, *peut-être, that way.*"

"Maybe so, but there ain't nothin'll surprise me after this."

"We hurry, to put him off, Sam," Antoine said, stroking with his oar. His voice was happy with looking ahead. "The small minute of waiting seem so long."

The pirogue nosed against the shore.

"Good luck to you, Caudill, and I hope you don't get no crazier and no crankier."

As Boone went by him, Black Sam looked up, his sleepy eyes suddenly soft and deep. "Goo'bye," he said. "Goo'bye, sad man."

The stage coach stood at the side of the trail, like a big black egg on wheels, the horses unhitched from it and tied up to trees. Two passengers were on the ground watching while two others helped the driver shape a pole to replace the doubletree that had snapped when an axle hung on a stump.

Unspeaking, Boone walked by, feeling the faces of the passengers turning with him and hearing their lips murmur after him. Out of the murmur a few words came. "Got his hair in pigtails. See? Like a wild Indian."

Farther on a priest sat on a stub, his hands folded over a book in his lap while his eyes dreamed in the trees. As Boone approached, he lifted the book and turned a page or two and then put it down and let his hands rest on it again while his lips moved silently. His eyes woke up when Boone came even with him. "Good day," he said. He was a middling man as to size, with a round face that was full and pink from good living and looked all the pinker for the white collar and black coat below it.

"How."

"Rather walk than ride?"

"Quicker if a man's used to it."

"The trees are beautiful. Such a forest!"

"Too damn thick for my likin'."

"Sit down, won't you?"

"What's on your mind?" Boone let himself down on a stump.

"You're what they call a mountain man? A fur hunter?"

"I've caught a few."

"Where?"

"Most any place you could name."

"Missouri? Yellowstone? Columbia? Colorado of the West?"

"All of them and more."

"Please excuse my questions. You see, I want to go among the Indians. I'm on my way to Bardstown and from there, hope, to the far west." His gaze went down to the hand folded across the book. "You've had many experiences with the Indians, I'm sure."

"Some."

"Say you were in my place, where would you like to go if you had the choice? I mean, to what tribe?"

"They don't want white men's ways, none of 'em."

"You haven't heard of our mission among the Flatheads?"

"Bunch of squaws. Squaw tribe, Flatheads and Nepercie both."

"Perhaps the others think they don't want white ways but they need God."

"They got their own god."

A small smile, not unfriendly but not shilly-shally either, came on the black robe's face. "A god, but not God."

"The ones they got do good enough—good as any, I reckon."

The priest shook his head while he held the small smile. "No god does well but God."

"Can't see much difference myself."

"It isn't what a man sees." A plump finger came up and laid itself over the heart. "It's what he knows in here."

"You think your way. I'll think mine."

The face reddened above the white collar, but the voice stayed gentle. "That's a privilege in this country even though we abuse it." It was a keen and knowing pair of eyes he had. After a little silence he added, "Men are happier knowing God," and waited for the answer it would bring.

"I git along all right."

"I see."

Boone got off the stump the priest had motioned him to. "No use to talk. Wisht you priests and preachers would stay out of the mountains myself."

"Why?"

"Just, goddam, because."

Boone didn't wait for more talk. He lifted his rifle and went on, walking the road to Paoli.

He always had felt at home outdoors. It was as if the land and sky and wind were friendly, and no need for a pack of people about to make him easy. The wind had a voice to it, and the land lay ready for him, and the sky gave room for his eye and mind. But now he felt different, cramped by the forest that rose thick as grass over him, shutting out the sun and letting him see only a piece of sky now and then, and it faded and closed down like a roof. The wind was dead here; not even the leaves of the great poplars, rising high over all the rest, so much as trembled. It was a still, closed-in, broody world, and a man in it went empty and lost inside, as if all that he had counted on was taken away, and he without a friend or an aim or a proper place anywhere.

When he came to a town, though, it wasn't any better, with fools staring and wagging tongues and thinking as how one man ought to be like another and all knuckling under to rules and ways and work and sheriffs and judges, and calling themselves free. And all living smothered by walls and roofs, breathing air that the good was gone from, breathing each other's stinks and the stinks that the hogs made in the pens back of the houses. Even the forest was better.

Near a deadening along the trail a big blue-tick hound got up from the door of a cabin and walked out, stiff-legged, for a look at Boone. His nose spread with smelling, and a soft rumble sounded in his throat. He raised old, sad eyes.

Boone's face. Someone had cut his tail off. The nubbin that was left tried a slow, asking wag.

Boone walked around him, and afterward a voice called out, "Say, you, that's my dog!"

Boone turned and saw the hound at his heels and a red-faced man standing in the door. "Don't act like it."

"Mine just the same."

"Who's sayin' he ain't?"

"You been whistlin' him off."

"You're a liar."

"Must have. He ain't never followed a stranger before. Here, Blue! Here you, Blue!"

The dog sat down, his grayed muzzle lifted toward Boone, his sad eyes seeming to flow with the question in them.

"It's them goddam leather pants has got him trailin' you. Thinks you're huntin', maybe. Chase him here, will you? I take it back about the whistlin'."

"Chase him your own self."

"All right, then, if you want to keep your dander up, mister, but I done took it back."

Boone said, "Git home, boy! Git!"

The hound didn't move, except that in the dust his piece of tail swung a slow quarter-circle.

"Good-enough hound," the man said, coming up with a stick, "but independent-minded as all hell. Has a idea he can think and do for himself. I've beat his hide off and kep' him tied and starved him and all, but like I said he's a mule-minded damn hound. If he wants to run he runs, and no holler or horn'll bring him back. Tell him to lie down and he stands up, and tell him to stand up and he squats."

"What went with his tail?"

"I got so bull-mad at him I bobbed it, thinkin' it would l'arn him some sense. Look at him, will you? Never seen him eye a man that way before, like you were God Almighty." The man raised the stick. "Go back. Blue. you ornery potlicker! Back!"

The dog stood up, his flews hanging loose and his great eyes swimming on Boone. "Back, damn you!" The club beat his hindquarters down. It knocked him half over. It made a hollow thump on the ribs. Boone saw the ribs working for breath.

"That's enough!"

"How's that?" The man stopped with the club upheld.

"You ain't fitten to own a dog."

"This here's my business."

"The hound's goin' with me."

The man let the club down. "Lookie here. That's same as robbery. I'll git the law."

"Not if he just follers, it ain't. I go for'ard and you back, and let the dog please himself."

"No, by God!"

The hound had got up again.

"It's fight, then."

"That's a top dog. Worth a piece of money, he is. Boar coon never lived that could match him. It ain't right."

"Git on! You ain't goin' to fight, and I don't aim to talk." Boone reached out with one hand and caught the man by the houlder and swung him around.

"It ain't right, I say! It ain't right! I'll git the law!" The nan shuffled toward the cabin, his red face back-twisted on his neck and his mouth running with words.

With his eye Boone pushed him toward the cabin. Then he swung around and set out, hearing the man half-whispering, "Here, Blue! Here, ol' Blue!" after his back was turned.

The trail ran like a thin, deep canyon through the trees. The forest squeezed in, dark and broody. There wasn't a sound in it; not the rustle of wind or the crack of a twig under a hoof or the chirp of a bird or anything at all unless a man listened close. Then he heard a soft padding behind him.

The tavern keeper sat in a hickory chair outside the tavern. "Bedwell?" he said, while his good eye lifted to the sky. The other was just a slitted sink in his face. "No, sir," he answered, "don't recall such a name." He swung his good eye back to Boone. "Bedwell? Sure you don't mean Bedwet or Bedwetters? Plenty of them around, no doubt." When he grinned, his good eye slitted, too. He rocked on the heels of his chair.

"I knowed him once, him and a man named Test as was a judge."

"Now you're shortenin' to my range. You'll shoot a long piece to find Test, though. He's laid his burden down, as the sayin' is. Do' know what his burden was, unless it were that big belly, but anyway he's laid it down." The tavern keeper held up one hand and counted off the fingers with the other. "Four years ago it was now, he up and died while court was settin'. Had a growth in him nothin' would tech. Went to Corydon and Tare Holt and all around where men had read medicine, but wasn't no man or no medicine could help him."

"Who's high sheriff now?"

"Had a big funeral. People from hell and gone come, some to grieve and some to guzzle. Good time for drinkin', with the weather cool and all. Biggest day I ever had, I do believe, unless maybe for elections. Never keered much for Test myself, but I declare I always felt some'at grateful to him for dyin' when he did. Yup."

The man patted his leg and looked off into space again. "Take like now, a death don't mean so much, even a big one, with the weather comin' warm." His eye left the sky and fixed on a cow that went creaking in front of his place, her tail fanning at the flies. "A man don't start a fire inside with the sun blazin' out. Leastwise, some don't. Now's for me, a swaller or so makes me forget bein' miserable hot. Trouble with cold-weather drammiers, they don't take enough."

Boone leaned on his rifle. Blue shouldered his thigh and sat down by him and sized up the tavern keeper with unwinking eyes. Across the road the courthouse sat, smaller than Boone had pictured it and old with weather. No crowd moved around it, but his mind made one, himself and Bedwell and the sheriff and the people following after, poking at him with their eyes and pecking at him with their lips. Beyond the courthouse he could see the jail. He could see the big, dark figure of the sheriff in the half-dark and the hand lifting with the whip.

"Good hound you got there," the man said, "only them great big eyes knows too damn much."

"Mark York still sheriff?"

"Not here, he ain't."

"What you mean?"

"He ain't sheriff here on account of he's a corpse."

"Dead?"

"Corpses generally is."

"Kilt, I reckon."

"Nope."

"How, then?"

"Died sudden. Died sudden and sodden, as someone put it. Had a fine belly of liquor and died in bed peaceful as a baby, and I bet his blood would run a full fourth proof the way he'd fired it up. How long you been gone?"

"A spell."

"Could be long or short."

"Could be."

"Don't waste wind, do ye? All right. All right. Ain't no law about talkin' or smilin' or such. Anything I can do for you, like settin' out a bottle or anything?"

"Wanted to see York was all."

"Friend of his?"

"I aimed to kill him."

Behind him as he started off Boone heard the front legs of the chair come down.

The cabin squatted in its hollow, the two-part cabin with the dog trot connecting and the shagbark hickory close by like always, except that lightning had struck it and put a scar high on the trunk. A breath of smoke came from the chimney and lay close over the roof as if it had no place to go. A pig grunted from its pen, and out in the pasture, closed in by the worm fence, an old cow lined her head with her neck and let out a long bawl.

The sun was fading out in the west, not going down in a blaze of clouds, not leaving twilight over the land, but just pulling from sight and letting the dark come on.

A long, thin man came out of the cabin carrying two buckets and made for the pigpen, and afterward his voice floated out in a wail, calling the cow. The cow stood listening, making up her slow mind, and tried a step and then another and settled to a draggy walk.

The woodpile was down almost to nothing. A man running and grabbing for a club might come up with no more than a splinter.

For a long time Boone sat on the slope of a hill, his mind not thinking, but feeling running old and deep in him. The blue-tick hound dozed at his side, waking now and then to sniff the air and rolling his sad eyes and fixing them on Boone as if to make double sure he was still there before closing them again.

Not until a window showed yellow with light and the dark had gathered thick in the trees did Boone move. Then he got up and let his feet take him down the slope.

Chapter XLV

"IT WAS the phthisic killed your pap," Ma said. She overflowed the chair she sat on, being big-hipped like an old squaw but wizened from the waist up and not strong and quick in her movements as a squaw would be.

"You told me that."

"It was his sinnin' killed him," Cora put in while she wiped a pan. "It was the Lord in His wrath."

"It ain't becomin' to talk that way, not about your man's pa."

"All the same it was."

Boone sat in the doorway, only half hearing what the two women said. It struck him again, though, that Dan's wife was a fool, laying everything to God or the devil. "If it was the Lord," he said while he watched Dan's two boys climbing a black-oak tree, "He was late gettin' around to it. He should've kilt him sooner."

"Your pap's dead, Boone," Ma said.

"That's what I heerd."

"It was the phthisic done for him."

Boone didn't say anything to that. Ma was getting old and mixed in her mind so that she didn't remember from one word to the next what it was she had said.

"It ain't for us to pass judgment on the dead," she went on. "Pap had good in him."

"Ought to. He never let none out."

"In a way you put me in mind of him. Boone, you're broody-like your own self, and quick to blaze out. Your pap went down to bone with the phthisic, him as was as strong and tall, and couldn't hardly make out to kiss his own wife. He wipe his mouth after a spell of coughin'."

and the skin lyin' loose, and his eye like glass with the fever. He asked about you, Boone, more'n once. You oughtn't to think hard of him." With one finger she wiped away the wet that had come to her eye.

Boone didn't bother to answer. It beat all how Ma could grieve for the likes of Pap and couldn't talk about him without a sad, rabbit-y look and the tears leaking. She fumbled with her knitting now, on account of the tears.

Punk had climbed almost to the top of the oak. He hung to it with one hand and waved down at the doorway while the sun shone on his wild suit of rusty hair. "Look at me, Uncle Boone! Look at me!"

Andy, being younger, couldn't climb so high, but he waved from lower down and called, "See me! See me, too!"

"Tell them boys to get out'n that tree and fetch some wood," Cora asked Boone.

Old Blue lay in the dirt, in a spot of shadow at the side of a bush. He rested his muzzle between his paws. A little circle of gnats wheeled around his lids, making him wink. When his big, sad eyes came open afterwards, they were always steady on Boone.

Ma said, "Time for Nancy Litsey to git here, if she's comin'. Said she'd bring some late-bloomin' flower seed for them cabbage plants I let her ma have."

"She'll come trottin'," Cora said, "bein' as there's an extry pair of breeches in the house."

"I swear, Cora!"

"She'll have her head high and that little nose openin' and closin' and her hair flyin' loose and no eye but for Boone." Cora put her hand to the rag that was tied over her own hair.

"Purty, to my way of thinkin'," Ma answered, "and comin' eighteen. Ain't she purty, Boone?"

"Good enough, I reckon."

"Can't see why you don't take notice of a good-turne girl like her."

"I seen good-turned ones afore."

"Redskins, I'll warrant," Cora said. "Heathens, that's hat." She was a strong-minded woman who never talked quite friendly but not unfriendly enough to make a ruckus about unless a body was on edge. Probably words wouldn't come her anyway; what she needed was a good lodge-poling. You look close to a heathen yourself," she said to Boone, with your hair long and all."

"He don't take after an Indian so much since he took off them buckskins and put on linsey," Ma put in.

"Too hot for leather," said Boone. "Too damn hot for anything." He squirmed his back against the doorsill to stop a tickle that a tear of sweat was making. It was a low, soft, smothering country, Kentucky was, where heat lay on the skin like a wet hand. Even the tail end of the day, with the sun going down and the shadows growing, still kept a man dripping.

Cora put lettuce in a wood bowl and cut radishes into it and went over to the fire and laid slices of hog meat in the spider so's to have some grease for the green stuff. She did most of the women's work, being as Ma's joint water had dried up. Ma said boiled sassafras rubbed on hot didn't do any good, or the wild raspberry wine that Cora had put by. In her slow, creaky way, though, Ma did a fair share of work. Her hands were always busy, with knitting or mending or carding wool from the few sheep Dan had, and every day she crippled down to the garden and tended the lettuce and beans and turnips and such.

Boone looked away from inside the house and saw Nancy Litsey coming up the path. Her hair shone like new straw in the low-blazing sun, and she had a red bow ribbon at the neck of her butternut linsey-woolsey. Homespun hung on most women like a sack, but with Nancy it put a man to wonder a little what was inside. She said "Evenin'" and stepped beyond him into the cabin.

Boone heard Ma and Cora speak to her and heard her an-

swer, without paying much mind to what they said. A body could go along like dead and keep things buried so deep in him they never came to thought, and then one day, seeing maybe a head of hair like wheat straw, he would feel a stirring in him like a finger working. He could go along like dead except sometimes at night when lonesomeness would come on him and he would listen to the small sounds of Kentucky, to crickets chirping and a mouse running in the grass and a mockingbird singing to the dark, while a hankering swelled in him for a wolf howl and the rush of mountain water.

Punk pulled at Boone's sleeve. "Git your rifle, Uncle Boone, and come and shoot a eagle for us."

"Hit's two eagles," Andy said, "nestin' in the big sycamore where the old sow beds down."

"Would you, Uncle Boone? Would you? They're big and black as anything."

"Let it cool off some."

"Promise?" Punk asked. "Promise?" When he nodded, the two of them ran off.

Cora's words sounded from inside. "Wisht I had a cucumber. This here'd be tasty with just a touch. I never took no stock in cucumber's causin' biles and chills and yellow janders."

Nancy had a voice like a small, clear bell. "Pa says wherever jack-o'-lanterns be, there's fever."

By the side of the stones that Dan had put down for a walk the marigolds were getting ready to bloom. Ma took care of them, too, and of the hollyhocks and cornflowers that were pushing up. A gourd was climbing on the palings of the fence, getting mixed up with a trumpet vine. Boone's gaze lazed along the flowers and over to Blue and up the vines and above the palings and on across Dan's tobacco patch to the trees and hills beyond. He could look without really seeing and let his mind go without really thinking. He could look yonder or look inside to where the women

were and make out, on a shelf, the little gourds that Ma kept her seed in and see hanging from a roof log the strips of dried pumpkin left over from winter, and it was as if another's eye saw them and another's head took them in. Only the little stirring in him was sharp, only the little finger of hunger working.

Dan came walking from the barn, swinging his legs slow and lazy. "Heat like to done for me," he said, letting himself down on a wood block and drawing his sleeve across his forehead. "Corn's a-wiltin', it's so hot and dry."

Dan had grown to be a long, slow-moving, slow-talking man with an Adam's apple like a point of bone pushing against the skin. There was a slow smile on his face a good part of the time, as if he found a secret, sad fun in most things, even in Cora and her tongue. Dan didn't like much to work, though. He didn't do any more than he had to.

Boone said, "I gave up on my job a little spell ago. Sun's like hell let loose."

"You been doin' too much anyway, cleanin' out stumps and rocks and makin' things smack smooth. Work like a crazy man, you do." Dan picked at the ground with a stick. "Like I said, wisht you'd take a notion to go in with me. Plenty of work here for two, and land enough."

"Don't reckon I care to." The women inside had quit talking to listen.

"It don't get you anything, roamin' don't. You had your taste of it, Boone."

Ma said, loud enough for them to hear, "Humans wasn't meant to traipse around all their lives."

"What you got out of it, after all?" Dan asked. "Don't see gold hangin' to you or rich clothes or anything."

"Wasn't lookin' for gold."

"Ever see any, Boone? Ever look for it? Must be some, in all that passel of country."

"We had beaver."

"You mean you never looked back, even, to see did you kick up any gold."

"We had beaver."

Dan looked at Boone like he might look at a crazy man. Boone just let him look. There weren't any words to make Dan know how it was. After a while Dan nodded and said, "Beaver, eh?" as if letting go of something he couldn't make out. "There'll be a pile of forks in the west before you know it, Boone. It'll be just like here, only more work to get started."

"You don't know a damn thing about it, Dan."

"I know I can't hardly handle this place myself." He gave Boone a slow smile. The knot in his throat pushed up along the skin of his neck and then went back again.

"Farmin's too much like work," Boone said.

"Might be we could buy us a nigger. What you think about slaves, Boone? Some fuss over the rights of it."

"I do' know."

"A body would think you never used your head at all. You got some idea, for certain."

"Bein' free means fight, to anything."

"So niggers ain't desarvin'?"

"Fight enough, and freedom comes."

"Could be you're right, but gettin' back to farmin' and to work, what's trappin' if it ain't work? And goin' hungry and cold and your feet wet half the time and your backside stiff from a horse and fear of redskins in you steady? What's that?"

Blue snapped at a fly and then laid his muzzle back between his paws.

Boone didn't answer right away. When he did it was to say, "We never counted it work."

"Can't see fun in it myself."

Cora spoke from inside the kitchen. "Have to be kin to Injuns for such to pleasure you." She stepped past Boone, walking as if she was all business, and carrying a bucket of

ashes that she dumped in the hopper outside. The hopper was full to the top. One day now she would dump water on the ashes and so make herself some soap.

Nancy said, "Maybe I'm kin, then. I feel like I'd like it."

Boone tried to picture her in a tepee, tried to picture the straw-colored hair and the pale face and the high head and the slender nostrils that had a way of widening now and then. She was like a young mare, that's what—a nervous mare watching and trying the breeze.

Dan laughed. "Reckon I'll go, Nancy, if'n you'll go along."

Boone heard Ma's voice. "Don't take no notice, Nancy. He don't mean anything. One thing about the Caudills, they's all one-woman men. Pap hisself was, till the phthisic carried him off."

Cora let her eye fix on Boone as she passed inside. It was a hard brown eye, set in a tight-held face, that seemed always on the watch for something to blame a body for. She was so set against sin, Boone thought she must have a time with it herself. Back at the table she gave a loud sniff. "What you sayin', Nancy! The West ain't a place for decent people."

"You know a hell's sight of things that ain't so," Boone said to her.

Cora went on talking to Nancy. "Can't get that Boone inside a door, hardly. Won't sleep in a bed. Has to be outside like a wild critter."

A house smothered a man, sure enough, once he had got the smell and look and feeling of the mountains in him. A house was close and shut in and full of little stinks, and a man with a roof over him and walls around couldn't see the sky or feel the wind or even know the time of night by looking overhead. "Don't like butter, neither, nor bread," Cora went on. "Likes marrow more'n butter. Put salt on a thing and you sp'ile it for him. Just straight meat and branch water, that's what he wants."

Dan winked at Boone. Under his breath he said, "Don't mind her, Boone. What the preacher says is righteousness, set so deep in her she's got to dig at somebody."

"Don't you ever hush her?"

Dan's face went solemn and tired for a little, and then the slow smile came. "It don't fret me much, not any more. Seems I can put up with things better'n's you, like with Pap. Half of livin' is just holdin' in."

The girl's carrying voice came through the door. "It don't seem to have worked him harm." Boone had an idea that her glance had slid over to him, sizing up his built and heft. He squirmed a little under his shirt, feeling not quite comfortable.

Dan winked again. "One on your side anyhow, Boone," he said, low-voiced.

"If 'tweren't for you, I'd hush Cora's mouth good."

"Don't do it, Boone. It don't matter to me, and you ain't here but a while."

Boone listened to Nancy's "I best be going," and saw her coming for the door. As she went by, she turned her face full on him and her mouth made a quick smile, showing small white teeth. She was gone then, stepping up the path like a high-blooded young mare. Boone watched her going and knew that Dan watched, too. Even Blue raised his old head. It was a soft look she had had for him. Maybe he could call it inviting. The world and all had been like make-believe lately, with nothing of real feeling in it, and now there was this sharp, beginning stirring.

Chapter XLVI

"TELL us about Injun fightin', Uncle Boone," Punk said. "I'd rather hear about b'ars," Andy put in. "Tell about a b'ar fight."

"No! Injuns! Injuns!"

"Bet I could kill a b'ar some time."

"You couldn't, neither," said Punk. "Shoo, maybe I couldn't my own self, and I got two years on you."

"It wouldn't harm ye to tell 'em a little bit of something," Dan said to Boone. There was a gentle scolding in his voice and in his face. "You ain't hardly opened your mouth to 'em about the west."

"Don't shine at storytellin'." Boone tried to get comfortable in his chair. It was a straight-back chair made of hickory poles and woven bark. Ma sat in one like it, except it had rockers, and Dan was hunched up on a three-legged stool that Boone remembered from Pap's time. The two boys were on the floor. Cora went out the open door with a pan of slop water. When she came back in, she said, "Nigh to bedtime, you boys."

"No, Ma! Uncle Boone's fixin' to tell a story."

"We ain't sleepy."

"Got the wide-eye, ain't ye?" Dan asked, smiling down at the pair of them.

Cora sniffed and went to wiping off the table.

"Cat's got your Uncle Boone's tongue," Ma said, her hands busy with her knitting needles. "Won't hardly pass the time of day with a pretty thing like that Nancy. Don't keer how his pap went."

Outside, the day was paling off toward night, though dark wouldn't come for an hour yet. Through the door Boone

could see the old barn and a mockingbird fluttering up from the roof of it and settling and fluttering again and all the time singing fit to tear the throat out.

The boys' faces were turned up to him, waiting for him to begin. With his first finger Punk worried his rusty forelock.

"Won't hurt the boys not to get abed so soon," Dan said to Cora. "Seems like Boone might come out of his balk." Cora put her washrag away and perched stiff on a chair as if just waiting for the foolishness to be done. It was her sitting that way that made up Boone's mind.

"Reckon you never seen a white bear," he said to the boys. Punk held his knees in his arms and rocked back and forth on his butt, listening.

Andy said, "Never seed ary kind of b'ar."

"A ten-footer, this one was, and heavy as a ox."

"How long would his teeth be?"

"Long as this here finger, almost."

"An' sharp? Sharp as granny's knittin' needle?"

"Sharper."

Punk said, "Leave him go on, Andy."

"Eatin' berries, he was, when Tom Quinn run into him, unexpected, high on the Little Bighorn. Good country there, Dan. You never seen the like of it, 'round here."

"What about the b'ar?" Punk asked.

"Bear riz on his hind legs sudden and made a swipe at Tom and like to tore his arm out. Muscle was all pulled from it, for a fact, and the bone showin'. Tom yelled out, and I looked up from downstream a piece and seen what was up."

Speaking of them made the time and place come back, and Tom Quinn's scream shrill in the ear and the bear standing tall and the sun white on the tips of his fur.

"Go on, Uncle Boone!" Andy said. "Don't keep stoppin'."

"I up with my old Hawken and fired quick and that there

bear let down and the bushes shook like a herd of bulls was in 'em as he made for me. And me without time to load my rifle again and only an old pistol on me."

"Did you kill him?" Punk wanted to know.

"Man has to keep his head. Has to keep steady. Has to hold his fire."

Boone was holding himself steady again while the bear came on. He was seeing him charging big and black against the graveled bank and rearing at the last with the red drip of berries on his mouth and the clawed hand ready for the slap that would tear a man's face off. He heard the grunted breath of him and heard Tom shouting.

"You kilt him, I bet," Andy said. The click of Ma's knitting needles drowned Tom out.

"A white bear on a charge allus rises at the last, to hit you a side blow with his paw. That's the slick time to shoot, when his face's struck out straight at you and a ball won't glance off his head."

Dan asked, "You wait that long, sure enough?"

"I took aim between the eyes and let go."

"What else, Uncle Boone?"

"No else to it. He went over, dead as a bone, and I stuck my knife in him."

Cora came farther to the front of her chair. "Bedtime. Hear, Punk? Andy?"

Dan said, "Y'eat b'ar, I reckon?"

"Barrin' somethin' better."

and get hisself hooked and so hang there till we come along with maybe his hind legs just touchin' the ground. Mostly they was dead, time we showed up."

"It's ag'in Scripture," Cora said.

"What's ag'in it?"

"Eatin' meat strangled in its own blood. The Book tell you to keep away from meat offered to idols and from blood and from critters strangled."

"An empty belly don't go by a book."

Cora said, "Better if it did. Git to bed, you boys."

"Ever go hungry for a long stretch?" Dan asked.

Before he thought, Boone spoke the thing that had sneaked into his head. "Rock goats saved us once."

"What's a rock goat?" Punk asked, hunching closer.

"Nothin'. I was talkin' to your pa."

Andy's mouth was pouty. "Ain't you goin' to tell us, Uncle Boone?"

"It ain't anything."

Cora got out of her chair. "I said bedtime."

"Go on, please! We can listen, can't we, Pa?"

"No, I told you," Boone said.

Dan's voice was soft. "Looks like your Uncle Boone has done talked hisself out." As Punk got off the floor, big Dan reached out and scuffed his head with his knuckles. "Take yourself along now, Punkin Top. And you, too, Andy."

"Where'd he get that rusty hair? His mammy's side?"

It was Cora that answered Boone. "Never no red heads in our family."

Ma looked up from her knitting. "Your grandpa, now was a little bit pinky, him that died of the milksick before ever you was born, Boone. Or was it after? I swear, I can keep things straight in my head. Anyhow, it was the milksick, but your Pap died of the phthisic."

The slow smile was on Dan's face. "Thi'n just stoled into the fambly, I reckon."

"You was sayin' about them rock goats," said Punk.

Boone got up. "This here chair makes me ham-shot," he said and walked out the door.

Chapter XLVII

SHE MET him by the fence that cornered halfway up the hill, as she had said she would.

Sliding away from the house, keeping to the shadows so's Dan or Cora or the boys wouldn't sight him, Boone saw her standing and the light lying on her from the moon that had just got untangled from the timbered hills and was setting out to shine. She was watching the moon, watching with her hands down and her chin up, and the lines of her soft and shadowy against the slope. He stopped to look while his heart beat strong in him and the stirring grew to a purpose that made all else seem small and distant. While he halted, he heard the mockingbird singing, singing blind or to the moon or the night or to the nest it had somewhere, singing loud and steady as if it had to sing. Climbing the rise, he kept his eyes on the girl but still went so quiet that it was old Blue, snuffing along a varmint's trail, that gave her a start.

"You scare a body dead," she said after she had made him out. "You don't make sight or sound, and then, of a sudden, you're standing close."

"Didn't aim to scare you."

"I don't guess you can he'p it. It's fightin' Injuns, ain't it, that makes you go so soft?"

"That and huntin'."

"Huntin's tame around here, so Mose Napier said. You know the Napiers?"

"Used to."

"You would, they lived so close. They was still here when Pa came to take over their place. Mose looked funny, for his face was whopperjawed."

Boone hunted for a spot to sit and cleared it of a dead limb that had blown from a wild cherry tree. "Best sit down."

Instead, she climbed the rail fence and sat facing into the moon.

"You traveled nigh everywhere, your ma says," she said while he leaned against the fence.

"A right smart."

"My pa has seen a sight of things. Been to Indiany twice. He says it's mostly hoss thieves and such in Indiany."

"I stoled a horse there, at Paoli."

"Stoled it!"

"To get even, was all."

"Oh." After a little silence she said, "I can't stay long. Ma or Pa'll skin me."

The moon was growing smaller as it climbed, smaller and brighter so that her hair caught a gleam from it and he could see her lips moving when she talked. Off a piece old Blue snuffled among the bushes, and crickets set up their thin crying. It wouldn't be so long until the katydids joined in, grieving because summer was going. What Boone heard most, though, was the mockingbird, singing as if it couldn't stop. "You ain't bothered with them mockingbirds in the mountains," he said while he studied her face.

"They don't bother me. It's nice to my ears, and brave, singing away all night."

"I'll take a painter, or a wolf."

"Sometimes I come awake at night, and there's the mockingbird singing, and it's like it was saying all was right."

"A bird don't know about that."

She might have been speaking to the moon instead of him. "Those times, I think I'll go to far places one day and

wear a boughten dress and eat off plates with flowers painted on."

"West is better, where there ain't such a passel of people." He let himself down in the spot he had cleared. "Best set here."

"Chiggers torment me terrible. Salt and lard don't help me, or anything but to let them die and hold back from scratchin'."

"Too early for chiggers," he answered, but she still sat there on the fence with her face seeming to dream at the moon.

This was how it was with a white woman. She put talk in the way and made up piddling dodges, pretending all the time not to know the prime thing that brought a man and woman together. A squaw, now, would own to what was in a man's mind. It would be yes or no right off, and no play-acting about it.

"Why'n't you get down?"

She climbed from the fence then, as if his words pulled her slow, and let herself walk over and sit down a little way from him. She turned her head to his turned face and drew back a little and smiled a quick, unsure smile, and he saw the white teeth and the little flare of the nostrils. "You're a solemn man," she said on her breath. "Can't tell what to make of you." She leaned back, holding her arms straight behind her, the heels of her hands braced to hold her up. That way, the moon shone full on her face, on the delicate nose and on the lips and on the wheat-straw hair combed back from her forehead. "You reckon-folks live up there, Boone?" she asked.

His hand reached for one of hers and felt it small and hard and braced against the grass. She didn't draw it away but didn't give it to him, either. It might have been that the hands touched by accident, and nothing meant by it. He took his own away and sat wondering, with an edge of anger in him, how a man went about making up to a white woman

He moved closer to her, crowding her a little, and she turned and said "Mister Caudill!" in a put-on voice and turned away again. "Can't tell what to think of you."

"Ain't any different from other men. I reckon, not in what I want."

He heard the quick catch of her breath, but when she spoke it was still make-believe. "Mister Caudill wants the whole hill to set on, him with his eye dark and set as the hole in a rifle bar'l and his mouth never smilin'. Reckon it would hurt him to smile." She brought her face around and turned her own smile on him.

His arm bore her back, the arm that had gone out of itself squeezed her to him and bore her back while his mouth hunted on her face.

"No! Boone!" The make-believe was gone. "No! No!" Her breath panted the words. Against his mouth her cheek was hot. "No!" Her back stiffened against his pull, stiffened and gave to him, little by little, while the panting grew and the hands that had made out to push him away lay weak on his shoulders. "No, Boone." His mouth found her lips and the lips came alive and her back settled to the ground. There was the hot, fast breathing of her in his ear and the arms tightening and the body answering, and, far off, the fool mockingbird singing, until the blood in his head shut it out.

He got up afterward and straightened himself, looking down while she lowered her skirt and curled on her side and lay in the grass, her mouth still a little broken from the feeling in her and her shoulders bucking to her catchy breath.

Her voice was small and jerky but still it spoke as if of something sure. "When'll we be married, Boone?"

He had wanted this woman and now he had had her and never wanted her again. In him there was only a deadness, the numb deadness of a man sure enough about dead. He sank down in the grass.

"When, Boone?" It was her hand now that hunted for

s and cuddled it in the warm palm as if it was hers for good and all.

"I ain't thought about that."

"We got to be married," she said, and he thought he heard the quick sound of scare in her tone. "We just got to be married."

Not even the stirring was in him but only the dead emptiness and, slowly, the feeling he had to go. He couldn't abide Kentucky longer, couldn't abide the little boresome life, couldn't abide Ma or Dan or this girl that thought she owned him. Things began to flash in his mind, out of the dark he'd kept them buried in. He had had this Nancy, and now he couldn't think of her for the dark, slender face and the big eyes of another that he had sworn to put away from all remembering.

"You ain't said when, Boone."

He had to go. His feet straightened and lifted him up. "I got a woman."

He left her sobbing in the grass. Once he heard her cry after him and took a glance back and saw her sitting and bowed over. It was too bad she took it so hard, but he had to go. Under him his feet quickened.

No light showed from the cabin. He opened the door and felt for his buckskins and rifle behind it and closed the door and put on his hunting shirt and leggings. Old Blue sniffed at the leather and at the rifle and raised his head, thinking these tame days were gone. In the moonlight Boone could see the slow switch of the nubbin that was left of his tail.

Things kept coming at Boone, up from his deep guts into his mind, out of no-feeling into hurt. He couldn't hold them back, couldn't keep folks and places and remembered doings out of his head, goddam it! Goddam it! Dark eyes and blind eyes and bright blue eyes. Black hair, red hair. "Reck on this'n just stoled into the fambly." Goddam it! Brown plains, west wind, wide sky, pistol sounding big inside the tepee.

He had to go. West again. Somewhere west, as in that far off time. Maybe to see Dick Summers on the way. Maybe to tell old Dick.

He didn't realize he was running until he saw Blue trotting to keep up.

Chapter XLVIII

A WOMAN yellow with fever and heavy with the young one in her paddled to the door and stood there puffing a little, looking at Boone out of eyes that had a sick shine in them.

"No got food," she said in a high flat voice while she shook her head.

"I ain't an Injun. Dick Summers here?"

"You look like one, enough to fool a body."

"Dick Summers here?"

"He is and he ain't. If it's the house you mean, he ain't. He's yonder in the field somewhere."

"I kin wait, or look for him, one."

"Set on the step then. He'll be in directly."

Boone leaned his rifle against the cabin and sat down. The woman eyed him a little longer and then went back into the cabin, walking splayed out like a duck.

The cabin was like what Boone thought it would be, knowing Summers, neat-built and strong, with the cracks chinked tight and real glass in the windows. It made a shadow, standing against the low sun, that reached out from him as far as a man might flip a pebble. Blue lounged into the shade, turned around twice and lay down, his old head pointed toward Boone. Down from the cabin, to Boone's right, there was a barn and farther on a field that was hip-high in corn. In the pen next to the barn a pig was grunting.

A dog that was all hair and bark ran from behind the house and yipped at Blue. Blue winked one eye and let a low growl out of his phlegmy throat, and the small dog backed up, still yipping. Then he lifted his leg against a bush and scratched the ground afterwards and trotted away with his head held high as if he had made a good out of it.

After a while Boone saw a man coming out of the field, driving a mule. The man had an old black hat on and a faded blue shirt and a pair of jeans that seemed about to drop off of him; he walked stooped, dragging his feet a little, but Boone knew it was Summers.

Boone sat watching and waiting while Summers went inside the barn. The mule came out and lay down and rolled up a dust, and Summers appeared and started walking toward the cabin, wiping his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

"How, Dick."

Summers stopped and squinted from under his dusty hat and then walked forward, still squinting. "I be dogged!" His hand slapped his jeans and sent out a puff of dirt. "If it ain't Boone Caudill! How be ye, boy?"

"So's to git here, anyways." Boone took the outstretched hand. The smile felt strange on his face, as if the face almost had forgotten how to smile. "The heat like to put me under."

Summers wiped his forehead again. "A man gits used to it. Wise-lookin' hound you got, but old and wore out like me. Come in and set. Where you pointin', Boone?" His voice rose. "Woman, bring that there jug."

"Outside's good enough, ain't it?"

Summers paused on the step. "This nigger's nigh forgot how a mountain man feels. Outside it is."

They sat cross-legged on the ground. Summers spun his hat toward the step, where it made a little cloud when it hit. With his hair cut off, a man might almost think Summers had been scalped. His head was white as any eagle's, and there were lines in his face that Boone didn't remember. He didn't remember that Summers' shoulders slumped, either,

or that his feet dragged or that his belly sagged over his belt. Except for the gray eyes that were straight as ever and still had a twinkle in them, it was as if Summers never had been a mountain man. It was as if he had grown old holding plow, looking at the hind end of a mule.

The woman came out of the door. She had a finger hook in the handle of a gallon jug and carried two tin cups in the other hand. For all he was old and changed, Summers must be a man yet to put that swelling under his woman's apron.

"This here's Boone Caudill," Summers said to her. "Be with me on many a spree."

"I hope you ain't workin' up to a case of bottle fever," the woman said, "not with such a sight of things to do. I thought he were a Injun."

"He'll stay for supper."

"It's nigh done."

"I ain't hungry," Boone said. "Just got a terrible dry."

Summers splashed liquor into the cups. "Put 'er down then." He looked at the woman again. "We kin eat any time S'posin' you leave us be."

To Boone she said, "Liquor don't set good with him no more. Too old to drink is what I tell him, and tied up with rheumatics. I hope you won't be temptin' him to get hisself drunk."

Boone looked at the ground, feeling the blood stir in him. It wasn't right for a woman to plague a man, leave alone a honest-to-God man like Dick. She ought to leave him be like a Blackfoot woman would know to do, like Teal Ey would know, looking at him with her big eyes, not sayin' anything, lettin' him have his way, not thinkin' he was right or wrong or drunk or sober but just that he was himself. Just that he was her man.

"You do look like a Injun." The woman paddled away closing the door after her.

"Good woman, for all she ain't such a punkin," Summer

explained. His eyes, fixed on the door as if he could still see her, were gentle.

Boone loaded his pipe and got it going and turned the stem for Summers after he had puffed to the earth and sky and the four directions. Summers blew out the smoke and lifted his cup and swished the whisky around in his mouth. He sat quiet then, letting talk wait on the liquor. Boone drank his drink in a gulp. Summers poured the cup full.

The frogs started singing as the day turned off toward dark. The air was moist and close like a wet shirt. Boone felt a trickle of sweat on his ribs. Up on the Teton it would be cool now, and dry, and the squaws would be playing in front of the lodges, playing and laughing and squealing sometimes while the sun sank and the west wind moved along the grass. Later the stars would come out, sharp as sparks, and coyotes would sing, and wolves, and a man warm in bed beside his squaw would hear the river whispering.

"Seven year it's been, Boone," Summers said. "What about you?"

"I'm headin' back."

"Where you been?"

"In Kentucky State, visitin' kin."

"And before?"

"With the Blackfeet, mostly, on Maria's River and the Teton and all around there."

Summers asked, "Teal Eye?"

"We hooked up." After a silence Boone added, "It wasn't her as set the Blackfeet on the *Mandan*. They wasn't Blackfeet anyways, but Big Bellies."

"Same breed of cats."

"No."

"Where's Deakins?"

A man was coming along the path toward them, his high, heavy boots kicking up a wisp of dust with each step. He had his homespun pants tucked into the boots. He said hello

with a little signal of the hand. "You wouldn't have a team to sell, would you, mister, ox or mule?"

Summers answered, "Reckon not."

"I got to find me a team."

"So?"

"I didn't plan too good, for Oregon."

"You ain't the only one."

"I got a woman and a whole mess of furniture and such down here to Independence. They tell me I won't ever make 'er with the outfit I got."

"You're too late anyway. Everybody's lit out."

The man nodded. "The woman got sick on me. I be et for a tater if a woman can't get sick at the damndest times. And besides, axle's busted and the mud it come over the hubs. Time I got to Independence there wasn't nobody left. I'm fixin' for next year."

"Be plenty of critters at Independence afore then."

"Uh-huh. Mules with forty devils in 'em and ox straight from hell, and all of 'em set at fancy figures."

The man's face was on Summers, waiting for him to agree. It was a round, open face, a face, Boone thought, that never could keep a secret.

Summers said, "Get shet of your furniture afore you start."

"Get shet of it?"

"You will by and by, regardless. Soonest done, soonest mended."

"Cherry chists and chairs and beds and all?"

"All of 'em."

The man said, "Good Lordy!" and added a question: "You ever try to throw your woman's stuff away?"

"She don't have no fixin's much, savin' what I built myself and can build again. Have a drink?"

The man shook his head slowly while his tongue came out and slid along his lips. "Reckon not. Liquor don't make for easy goin' in my fambly."

Boone said, "Your woman, now, she must be some. It was her notion, going to Oregon, I bet."

"Come to think on it," the man said as a child might have said it, "maybe it were."

"What for you goin'?"

"What for I'm goin'! My God, man, where you been? I'm goin' for soil rich as gold and crops the like of which you never see, and weather that suits a man come winter or summer, and no fevers to shake the bones loose. That's why I'm goin'. Ain't you hearn about Oregon?"

"You been there?"

"I been told plenty."

Boone turned to Summers. "We've half-froze in Oregon. We have, now. And gone with our bellies squeezed up tight on wildrose buds and damn few of them about. Ain't it so, Dick?"

"Many's the time."

The man's eyes were full of doubt as he studied them. "That ain't what I hear."

"Besides," Summers put in, "you'll be fightin' Britishers afore you know it. Britishers and Indians both."

"It's our country, by God! It's good old Americky, clean to fifty-four forty, or will be, anyway."

"You'll freeze out and starve out," Boone said, "or maybe get rubbed out, if'n ever you get there."

"What you mean, 'rubbed out'?"

"You'll go under, that's what."

"Go under?"

"Get kilt. Don't you know white man's talk?"

"I reckon maybe you got a reason to scare a man off."

Boone swallowed another cup of whisky and wiped his mouth with his knuckles. "It ain't your country, nor any greenhorn's country. Why'n't you stay to home?"

"I reckon there's room for all."

Boone got up. "There ain't. She's crowded now so's a

man can't catch his breath. It belongs to them as found it and lived in it. Hear?"

"You an Injun?"

"Piegan, me!" Boone shouted and whooped a war cry and jumped for the rifle he had leaned against the cabin.

The man backed off, his eyes wide and white as onions. "All the same," he said while a look of balkiness covered the first surprise in his face, "a man's got a right to go where he wants." He turned and walked down the path, his shoulders held straight under his checkered shirt.

Boone leaned the rifle back against the cabin and sat down again. "Give me another drink, Dick. Damn greenhorns!"

A twinkle shone in Summers' eyes and then went out. "A passel of 'em's went a'ready, and more's a-comin'."

"They won't shine in Oregon. They'll come draggin' back, them as don't go under."

"I do' know, Boone. They got the bit in their teeth, some of 'em, like you just seen." Summers was quiet for a while and then went on, "I reckon they'll be trompin' over the trails we made and climbin' the passes you and me saw first and pokin' plows in along the river bottoms where we used to camp. They got a hunger, they have. This nigger don't look for the old days to come back."

They sat quiet, drinking, as the dark closed in around them. A screech owl began to whimper in a tree behind the cabin. Ma would say someone was going to die. Old Blue got up and stretched and looked at Boone as if asking his leave and went moseying away.

"Changes come on, regardless," Summers said while he poured more whisky. "Ain't nothin' in beaver—not since them Londoners took to silk."

"Beaver's sceerce."

"Not even a rendezvous any more."

"Bridger's set up a fort on Black's Fork where the free trappers aim to go."

"What you figger to do, Boone?"

Boone let his empty cup dangle from his finger. It was a long time before he felt like answering. Then he said, "There's bufler aplenty."

"You, a true mountain man, hunt coarse fur!"

"Maybe." In his mind's eye Boone could see Zeb Callo-way, sitting there in the dusk by Fort Union. He heard his voice, coming through all the time since: "Another five year and there'll be naught but coarse fur, and it goin' fast."

It was as if Summers saw and heard Zeb, too, for he asked, "How long since we seen your uncle?"

"Thirteen year or so, it was."

"Thirteen. It don't seem that long, in a way, but in a way it seems so far back it wasn't even us as heard him."

"He was wrong, wrong by eight or ten years."

"Close enough to be right. What went with him?"

"He went under there at Union, went under happy, with his belly so full of whisky it kilt him."

"It's a good way, if a man's got to go."

"Good as any."

"You ain't said about Deakins and Teal Eye. You goin' back to Teal Eye?"

Summers studied Boone. He was heavier than he had been, and even stronger, as strong as a buffalo bull, by the looks of him. The muscles of his arms showed under his shirt, and the thick column of his neck spread out along his shoulders and down the swell of his chest.

"Have another."

For all his strength, though, there was trouble in him. Summers could see it in his eyes and around his mouth and in the way he drank liquor, as if apurpose to make his mind blank. He was a man with a misery eating at him—a deep misery, that would come out by and by, likely, if he kept downing whisky. Somehow Summers was reminded of a thing hunted, and no way for it to turn. Already the whisky was showing on Boone. His eyes slid slow in his head, and

his mouth moved around a word as if to shape it careful before turning it loose.

"We had us some times, Boone."

"Y'ever see the upper Teton, or what they called the Tansy?"

"Where it meets up with the Marias is all. It's had more names than most. Rose was one of 'em."

"Higher up there's two buttes and the valley wide above and, where the river comes out'n the mountains, a peak like an ear on its side."

"I never seen that."

"Christ, but it's fair country, Dick! Mountains to the west, and the valley and the plains rollin' away. And buffler! Christ, I seen buffler thick as gnats. I seen 'em chased over pishkuns and lyin' kickin' below by the hunderds, and the Piegans with clubs and knives and arrers runnin' among 'em, makin' meat."

It wasn't so dark yet that Summers couldn't see. Boone brought his cup to his mouth. His eyes were set far off, seeing the Teton, Summers imagined, and the mountains and the buffalo, and seeing Teal Eye, too, though he didn't speak of her. For an instant Summers saw it all, too, and he felt himself wrench inside, wanting to be loose again, and free, wanting to trap and hunt and to know danger and good loneliness, wanting to see bucks with feathers in their hair and squaws in scarlet blankets. And then the feeling went down in him, leaving a small deep sore that didn't bother him if he just didn't pick it. He was too old now, and he had a white wife and a baby coming on, and the old days were lost, anyhow. Farming was the right caper for him, when he really thought things out.

"I know," he said, watching Boone. "Feel like eatin'?"

Boone came up on his feet and steadied himself.

"I'm goin' on, Dick."

"Better stay all night." Summers arose. Boone was rock-

ing back and forth as if he rode the deck of the old *Mandan* in a storm.

"I got to go on."

"You ain't right to go, Boone. You had a sight of liquor."

"Maybe I'll see you."

"You'll need more whisky, come mornin'," said Summers, thinking maybe he could change Boone's mind through delay. "Come inside and I'll pour you some." He went through the door and lighted the oil lamp with a splinter held in the coals of the fireplace. He found a bottle on the shelf. "Set a spell longer."

Boone didn't seem to hear him. He stood rocking, his eyes distant and fixed and a look on his face such as Summers never had seen there.

"The world's a-comin' at me like a sea," he said, "a hill and then a holler rollin' under my feet, tryin' t'upset me. I drunk too much, Dick, but I got to go on. Got to go for'ard." His hand took hold of the latch on the half-opened door.

"Don't hurry yourself. I ain't got this bottle ready yet."

Boone looked down in his palm, at the latch his hand had broken off. "It's all sp'iled, I reckon, Dick. The whole caboodle."

"I don't guess we could help it," Summers answered, nodding. "There was beaver for us and free country and a big way of livin', and everything we done it looks like we done against ourselves and couldn't do different if we'd knowed. We went to get away and to enj'y ourselves free and easy, but folks was bound to foller and beaver to get scarce and Injuns to be killed or tamed, and all the time the country gettin' safer and better known. We ain't see the end of it yet, Boone, not to what the mountain man does against hisself. Next thing is to hire out for guides and take parties acrost and sp'ile the country more. You must've heerd about old Tom Fitzpatrick pilotin' movers to Oregon last year, damn him! It's like we heired money and had to spend it, and now it's nigh gone."

"This here hand done it," Boone said, holding the hand before him. "This here finger pulled the trigger. I reckon I sp'iled it all, Dick." He looked at Summers, his eyes so dark and troubled the gaze of them was like a quick, deep pain in a man. "I kilt Jim."

"Kilt Jim!"

"I been tellin' myself I done right, Dick. But I don't know. I don't know for sure. Maybe I ain't honest."

"Kilt Jim!" Summers said again.

"It's like it's all sp'iled for me now, Dick—Teal Eye and the Teton and all. Don't know as I ever can go back, Dick. Goddam it! Goddam it!"

He had pushed the door clear open, and his feet shuffled and found the step and took him out. Summers followed him, forgetting to give him the bottle he held in his hand. A dog barked, town-way, and another took it up and another until finally Boone's old blue-tick hound came loping from behind the cabin and stopped and pointed his nose at the sky and let loose with his deep bay. For a while Summers could see Boone, weaving big and dark into the darkness, and then he couldn't see him any more, and he turned and went back into the cabin. There was cold corn pone on the table, and cold poke greens and a ham butt and a pitcher of buttermilk. His woman had gone to bed, she tired so easy these days.

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